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ROCKSTAR'S OPEN WORLD VIDEO GAMES AS IDEOLOGICAL APPARATUSES

A Case Study of Red Dead Redemption Series

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ABSTRACT

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The topic of this thesis stems from a desire to better understand the political and ideological dimensions of virtual worlds. This is a particularly interesting subject, because the game industry itself tends to undermine political and ideological dimensions of the games they produce. However, a video game is a highly constructed cultural artifact and thus a video game should be considered as a powerful rhetorical tool, which make use of multiple rhetorical resources simultaneously, including audiovisual design, storytelling, character development, mechanics, gameplay and so on (Bogost, 2007). This thesis understands a video game as a playable representation and acknowledges that video games by their very nature are at the intersection of both system and representation.

The purpose of this study is to examine video games as ideological apparatuses. The goal of the thesis is to offer an insight on how to better understand the reality of virtual space as an ideological landscape. The goal is approached by utilizing Louis Althusser's (2012) theory of ideological state apparatuses to open-world adventure video games. The usefulness of Althusser's theory is demonstrated by closely analyzing the Rockstar Games' representation of the West in *Red Dead Redemption* series.

The key argument of the study is that video games function as ideological apparatuses on two levels. First, they are a part of cultural ideological state apparatuses. Second, video games themselves render in front of us completely new worlds with their own ideological apparatuses. As a result of the study, a reader understands the nature of a video game as an ideological apparatus and can recognize the ideological and political underpinnings of a virtual reality rendered for them in a video game.

Keywords: video games, ideology, politics, Rockstar Games, Althusser, Marxism, Game Studies, Red Dead Redemption, Red Dead Redemption 2

The originality of this thesis has been checked using the Turnitin OriginalityCheck service.

FOREWORD

The learning process this thesis provided proved to be a pleasant one. The course of operation involved feelings of deep despair, but gladly more moments of excitement and success. I would like to thank my kids, whom I too many times ignored playing and thinking about playing an outlaw; and my friends, without whose unconditional support the completion of this thesis would have been impossible. I also want to offer my thanks to postdoctoral researcher Mikko Meriläinen for guiding me to the right directions at the times of confusion, and associate professor Olli Sotamaa for crucial advices, patience and support.

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1 INTRODUCTION

The interest towards the topic of this thesis is rooted in my interest of political and ideological elements displayed in representations of cultural artifacts. As game studies as a field has moved onwards from its foundational debate between ludology and narratology (Murray, 2005), the topic of the thesis has garnered attention of the researchers only relatively recently (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Pérez Latorre, 2015; Mitchell, 2017; Gunkel, 2018; Murray, 2018). This thesis adopts the view of video games as cultural objects and as an artform and thus places video games at the intersection of system and representation.

Video games have, both as an industry and as cultural objects, developed considerably in recent decades. Digital storytelling has taken leaps and video games today often offer a player complicated, multiform stories which place emphasis on player choice and freedom (Murray, 2017; Muriel & Crawford, 2018). At the same time, video games are becoming increasingly popular and different elements of video games are spreading widely in society (Muriel & Crawford, 2018). This is noted by Muriel and Crawford (2018; 22) who state, that “gamified culture to our everyday practices comes from primarily and essentially from video games; their logics, aesthetics, languages, practices, and relations”. They call this development the videoludification of society. Thus, Wark’s (2007) consideration, are video games becoming reality or is reality becoming a video game, seems in this light more relevant than ever.

However, we as players easily consider these virtual worlds apolitical. This thesis advocates consideration of all video games as political, because as Mitchell (2018; 57-58) argues, “they institute a way of thinking and acting in their design and because they interpellate the player through pleasure”. As the expressive potential of video games is displaying more sophistication, the need to develop the tools for their critical analysis is becoming increasingly necessary (Pérez Latorre, 2015). However, this is a multifaceted task, and no one can research every aspect of a video game. Thus, a lens or a framework is necessary to decode the ideological underpinnings of a video game.

Video games offer players new worlds to explore and conquer (Gunkel, 2018; Murray, 2018). This thesis places its focus on political and social reality of a virtual space and by doing so, formulates an

understanding of video games as ideological apparatuses by following a refined Marxist Theory of the State introduced by French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser.

To this day, this thesis considers that Marxism is a relevant framework to critical approach to capitalism. Marxists have traditionally viewed capitalism as a system of repression, “which enable the ruling classes to ensure their domination over the working class, thus enabling the former to subject the latter to the process of surplus-value extortion” (Althusser, 2012; 106). As Althusser (2012) explains, the State is the “machinery” of this repression. Central to Marxist thinking is then the question concerning the control of the means of the production. Considering the recent crises under global capitalism (Panitch & Gindin, 2012), and the rising income gap between rich and poor of the world (European Commission, 2020), the idea of the class struggle can be argued to have retained its relevance.

To Althusser (2012), the State “machinery” consists of two parts, the State power and the State apparatus. Further, the State apparatus is divided to two closely related apparatuses, the repressive state apparatus (RSA) and ideological state apparatuses (ISAs). While RSA functions by violence, ISAs function by ideology. The State power is held by the ruling class and its ideology is disseminated actively through different ISAs. An individual is a subject, who is interpellated by various ISAs to accept the dominant ideology as obvious. (Althusser, 2012.)

This thesis thus adopts a view that while video games unquestionably are a part of the cultural ISA (Garite, 2003), they also in fact simulate Althusser’s theory in action (Quijano-Cruz, 2008). In these simulations, game designers are in control of both, the State power and the State Apparatus. A player is rendered as a subject, who is interpellated through different institutions of a game (ISAs) to progress in it, but also, as this thesis argues, at the same time to absorb its ideology.

The importance of Althusserian reading of video games can be summarized in three points.

- 1) Video games are an important part of new capitalism. Not only is the game industry economically significant, it is also the single fastest growing entertainment sector (capitalgroup.com, 2019).

- 2) Video games also function as a part of Cultural ISAs. They have a mass appeal, and thus can be considered being constitutive of mainstream ideologies (Murray, 2018;

Morgan, 2020). This is, because they either participate in the construction, reflection, and renegotiation of these ideologies.

3) Video games are much about a power relation between a designer and a player (Sicart, 2005; Mitchell, 2017). This power relation resembles the relationship between a subject and the State described by Althusser (2012). In this sense, video games can be considered simulations of the class struggle.

From Althusserian perspective, a player is attempting to capture the state power by learning to master a game's algorithms. Video games thus become revolutionary in a sense that, by mastering a game, a player's aim is to capture the state power and thus, get to state "your rules won't hold me" to a game's designers. Video games are particularly interesting from this perspective, because they also share resemblance to educational ISA, which is named to be one of the most important ISAs by Althusser (2012). That is, because in schools teachers have the full attention of the classroom in what is supposedly a neutral environment, and the content they teach is thus understood as "obvious" (Althusser, 2012). Similar is true with video games. A player gives his undivided attention to a game to complete its story, which often requires considerable amount of time. From this perspective, it can be argued that a game designer's task is to interpellate a player to invest in the game experience, and at the same time make a player more susceptible to absorb its ideology.

For example, the ability to use video games as a platform to educate, advertise or work has garnered the attention of game scholars (Bogost, 2007; Yee, 2006). However, the political or ideological underpinnings of video games has been relatively understudied subject in the field, until recently (Perez-Latorre, 2015; Mitchell, 2017; Murray, 2018; Gunkel, 2018). The view proposed by Flanagan and Nissembaum (2014), that video games are not created in a vacuum, so they at least at some level reflect the worldview of their creators, is commonly agreed upon. If we accept Ian Bogost's (2007) consideration of video games as a powerful rhetorical tool; the messages, the meanings and the experiences they render for the player become an interesting research subject.

The aim of this thesis is to consider how video games function as ideological apparatuses. The question is approached by placing focus on single-player open world adventure video games. Rockstar Games' *Red Dead Redemption* (RDR) series, namely *Red Dead Redemption* (2010) and *Red Dead Redemption 2* (RDR2, 2018), functions as a case study for the theories presented in this thesis to be demonstrated in action. While Rockstar Games also has published a title called *Red Dead*

Revolver (2004), it is excluded from this study, because it has almost nothing but a thematic connection to other *RDR* titles. As stated, the focus is on the single-player experience, so the multiplayer modes and additional downloadable content (DLC) of both titles are also excluded.

What started as DMA design, a small Scottish game studio, has grown to be one of the biggest multinational game companies in the world, Rockstar Games. It is reported (Shanley, 2020) that for example *Grand Theft Auto V* (*GTA V*) has sold over 120 million copies, and *RDR2* over 29 million copies. These figures make the former to be the best-selling title of the current decade (Shanley, 2020). Rockstar Games has garnered infamous reputation not only with their games, which often depict violence, crime and vandalism in contemporary society, but for their working practices and such as well (see for example Schreier, 2018; Sinclair, 2018; Berry, 2019; Badenhorst, 2019). However, their games have also attracted a lot of financial and critical success, thus leading Rockstar's games to become one of the most popular entertainment products of our time.

RDR series was chosen for as a case example, because both installments are critical and commercial successes, and because this thesis contends that ideological apparatuses can be clearly observed in these game worlds. They offer a player an open world to explore with plethora of activities to participate in. However, the main stories of these games are represented rather linearly. Thus, the variety of player experiences they provide derives from almost solely from how players approach these game worlds; do they focus on the main story or more free exploration of the world. Because Rockstar Games' releases are often controversial, they offer an interesting topic of an analysis and a clear example to highlight this thesis' most crucial point, the importance of ideological analysis of the mainstream video games.

What should also be noted here, is that both games, *RDR* and *RDR2*, were chosen to be analyzed because they narratively form a whole, and the ideological analysis is more concise, when the complete story is considered. This is done with an understanding that their gameplay elements are slightly different.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To understand video games as ideological apparatuses, an examination into earlier conceptualizations of video games as political and ideological landscapes is necessary. This chapter produces a theoretical framework, on which the understandings of this thesis are based upon. The chapter is divided to five sections, which all work as a backdrop for the arguments presented in this thesis. First section defines the key concepts of the study. These considerations help to situate *Red Dead Redemption (RDR)* games as open world adventure games, but also as Westerns. Interestingly, *RDR* games seem to carry on the tradition of their counterparts in the medium of film, particularly the so-called Spaghetti Western. Second section considers the meaning of video game literacy and offers an understanding of reading and writing video games from an academic perspective. The third section outlines video games as rhetorical tools. In the fourth section, this thesis conceptualizes open world adventure games as experiences; and the fifth section focuses on politics of open world adventure video games.

What started as a hobby at the universities has become the dominant cultural force of the 21st century (Murray, 2018). As technical developments have enabled video expression to become more sophisticated, it has become crucial to consider how to study political and ideological realities of these thoroughly designed virtual worlds (Pérez Latorre, 2015). Considering that the production of these games requires a lot of resources, the ability to construct them has become limited to the hands of the few (Bown, 2018; Gunkel, 2018). Thus, it can be argued that the study of political and ideological underpinnings of mainstream video games is becoming alarmingly important. Especially when considering that the videoludification of society, the spread of gamified elements to our

everyday lives, is clearly observable (Muriel & Crawford, 2018). Video games have become almost like a test ground for new potential ways to utilize technology as a tool of persuasion (Bown, 2018).

Often a considerable amount of our time is spent in these virtual environments (Kinnunen et al., 2018). The difficulty of defining a typical gamer (ESA, 2020) underlines the fact, that video games can no longer be considered solely as young boys' toys. Almost all people play, thus the focus of the research is now more on what people play (Kinnunen et al., 2018). However, we easily tend to consider these worlds apolitical (Murray, 2018). Thus, this thesis argues that the understanding of who gets to speak, what is spoken, and how different meanings are conveyed, and how they appear in conjunction to contemporary reality, becomes a crucial part of remaining literate in the 21st century.

The connection between video games as neoliberal capitalism and its values are often considered (see Murray, 2018; Muriel & Crawford, 2018). Marxism provides critical approach to capitalism, thus a framework based on Marxist ideas provide an interesting viewpoint to critically consider ideological aspects of video games (Kirkpatrick et al., 2016). For example, many aspects of our lives are already gamified (Muriel & Crawford, 2018). We socialize with friends and family (*Facebook, Instagram*), work (*Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn*), search for partners (*Tinder*) and hunt for imaginary monsters (*Pokemon GO*) with different applications that confuse the line between reality and virtual. Thus, it can be considered that video games provide a playground for simulation of our possible futures. An analysis of video games from political and ideological perspectives then, not only might show us the potential shape of things to come, but also offer a reflection on the way things currently are (Bown, 2018).

2.1 KEY CONCEPTS

This section provides insights to the key concepts of this thesis. First it offers an understanding of Althusserian reading of ideology and ideological state apparatuses. Then the section progresses to consider the problematics of conceptualizing a video game genre. By the end of this section, this thesis defines and situates *RDR* games as open world adventure games and Westerns.

2.1.1 Althusser's theory of ideology and ideological state apparatuses

Louis Althusser (1919-1990) was a French structuralist Marxist philosopher and a member of French communist party. By fusing Marxism and structuralism, he convinced philosophers and intellectuals alike of Marxism's continuing relevance. The key concept in Althusser's thinking is ideology. Originally, Althusser argued that ideology is a "system of representations" which is governed by rules that work for political aspirations of the ruling class (Althusser, 1964). He initially conceptualized ideology as a matter of the unconscious, unavoidable even by the ruling class (Althusser, 1964). However, he later changed his position and refined his understanding of ideology in the article "Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)" (Althusser, 2012). While ideology remained inescapable to all, Althusser argued that ideology is realized in real actions and behaviors, not only unconsciously (Althusser, 2012). In the paper, Althusser proposes a new addition to the Marxist theory of the state. As traditionally Marxist have

claimed that (1) the state is the repressive state apparatus, (2) State power and State apparatus must be distinguished, (3) the objective of the class struggle concerns State power, and in consequence the use of the State apparatus by the classes (or alliance of classes or fractions of classes) holding State power as a function of their class objectives, and (4) the proletariat must seize State power in order to destroy the

existing bourgeois State apparatus and, in a first phase, replace it with a quite different, proletarian, State apparatus, then in later phases set in motion a radical process, that of the destruction of the State. (Althusser, 2012; 109.)

Althusser argues that not only it is

necessary to distinguish between State power (and its possession by ...) on the one hand, and the State Apparatus on the other. But I add that the State Apparatus contains two bodies: the body of institutions which represent the Repressive State Apparatus on the one hand, and the body of institutions which represent the body of Ideological State Apparatuses on the other. (Althusser, 2012; 113.)

While the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) contains the government, the police and the military, and function primarily by repression; Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) consist of institutions like religion, education, family, and function primarily by ideology. While the RSA becomes visible on rare occasions; ISAs are established components of a society; and because the ruling class holds State power, it is active in the ISAs as well. As Althusser states, “the State apparatus secures by repression [...] the political conditions for the action of the Ideological State Apparatuses” (Althusser, 2012; 114). (Althusser, 2012.)

Thus, ISAs primary function is to reinforce the hegemony of the ruling class by replicating its dominant ideology. The educational ISA is considered by Althusser as specifically important one, because teachers have the full attention of the classroom, in what is assumed as a neutral environment. Thus, the content taught is interpreted as natural or obvious. (Althusser, 2012.)

Althusser (2012) posits his understanding of ideology in four hypotheses.

- 1) Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence
- 2) Ideology has a material existence.
- 3) All ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects.
- 4) Individuals are always-already subjects.

Althusser's hypotheses argue that ideology does not reflect the real world but "represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to the real world" (2012; 126). According to him, we are always within ideology because of our dependence on language to form an understanding of our reality. Thus, different ideologies are representations of our social and imaginary reality; not the representation of reality itself. Ideology has a material existence, because "an ideology always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices" (Althusser, 2012; 126). To Althusser, ideology thus always becomes explicit through actions, which are applied into different practices. Ideology is inescapable to all, because our becoming of subjects happens even before we are born. (Althusser, 2012.)

What thus seems to take place outside ideology (to be precise, in the street), in reality takes place in ideology [...] That is why those who are in ideology believe themselves by definition outside ideology: one of the effects of ideology is the practical denegation of the ideological character of ideology by ideology: ideology never says, "I am ideological". (Althusser, 2012; 131.)

These ISAs “hail” people and offer an identity, which is accepted as natural or obvious (Althusser, 2012). This is what Althusser (2012) refers to as interpellation. As Althusser explains,

the individual is interpellated as a (free) subject in order that he shall submit freely to the commandments of the Subject, i.e. in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection, i.e. in order that he shall make the gestures and actions of his subjection all by themselves. (Althusser, 2012; 136.)

The act of “hailing” the subject is committed by multitude of ISAs (Althusser, 2012). Althusser states, that

the individual in question behaves in such and such a way, adopts such and such a practical attitude, and, what is more, participates in certain regular practices which are those of the ideological apparatus on which ‘depend’ the ideas which he has in all consciousness freely chosen as a subject. (Althusser, 2012; 126.)

2.1.2 Open world adventure video games

For the purposes of this thesis, a loose definition of video games is adopted. If elements of a game include conflict, rules, player ability and a valued outcome, a video game then, is a game where gameplay is controlled by the computer (Wolf, 2001). Thus, video game can be anything from games downloaded from the internet or stored on a storage media, free and subscription-based online games, mobile games to console-based games played on televisions or handheld devices (Wolf, 2001). However, betting, gambling, and other digital games, where money functions as a primary motivation, are excluded from this definition.

Video game genre

This sub-section focuses on the problematic nature of defining a video game genre. However, the section offers a consideration, why a genre is a useful concept when one aims to divide games to different groups, which share a certain family resemblance. The concept of a genre is relevant for this study, because it not only offers an insight where a game's signifying practices arise from, but also a possibility to contextualize the findings.

Goddard and Muscat (2017; 8) argue that, a “genre offers a language to communicate and generalize about a common likeness between games [...] in clear verbal form”. Thus, a genre sets contexts to motivate research and situate findings. Understanding of a genre provides a scholarly basis to analyze design solutions and approaches, but also functions as a method to decode a game (Goddard & Muscat, 2017). Goddard & Muscat argue that the meaningfulness of a genre can be investigated on how it situates between the over-particular and the over-universal. To them, this means that claims made need to apply to more than one kind of game to be relevant. However, making generalizable claims can prove to be a difficult task. When early video games were easily divided to shooters, platformers, role playing games (RPGs) and so on, the contemporary video games often make use of wide variety of these genres. However, it is crucial that “genre argues claims that are explicit, contestable and defensible, so that it supports scholarly tradition” (Goddard & Muscat, 2017; 12). This way genre offers delimited scope and institutes a context in which to situate findings.

Clarke et al. propose new more fluid ways to understand video game genres by dividing games by family resemblance, faceted classification, or appeal factors. Family resemblance refers to category of video games that share certain resemblances. Faceted classification is based on illustration and

decomposition of different features of video games. Appeal factors, such as story, character, setting, and pacing, are also presented as a useful way for considering a video game's genre. (Clarke et al., 2017.)

Open world adventure video games are a subgenre of video games. Their characteristics include an open world for a player to explore, narrative elements to engage a player, and at least a declaration of granting a player freedom on how to approach these objectives. In a sense, they are about "creating immersive worlds with embedded rules and relationships among objects that enable dynamic experiences" (Jenkins & Squire, 2012). Open world adventure games are closely related to RPGs and sandbox games. They differ from RPGs in that, while different choices play crucial role in RPGs, open world adventure games are often bound to rather linear narratives with little or no say to the way the world develops. They also differentiate from RPGs in that they restrict a player's possibility to modify playable character radically. They often contain some elements of character development familiar from RPGs, but usually the player is forced to role play a certain character, whereas in RPGs players can select or create their character often more freely. While they contain open worlds to explore like sandboxes, they also share ability to foster emerging narratives. But while sandbox games might not include narrative elements at all, in open world adventure games to complete a game, a player is required to follow the narrative elements which are often presented in a rather linear manner.

Good examples of open world adventure games are for example, *RDR* series, *Grand Theft Auto (GTA)* series, *Assassin's Creed* series (2007 -), and *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017) just to name a few. In these games a player experiences linear narrative with a predestined character. These titles include some elements of character development, but whatever a player chooses, the game world and its future

remain the same. Thus, even though a player inhabits an open world, all the choices are already made (Mitchell, 2017). In these games there is often little meaningful choices to be made, because overall they have only a superficial or no bearing over the story itself. Thus, for the purposes of this thesis, the character development and different side quests, activities and tasks can be considered to exist in these games solely to interpellate a player to progress in the story.

2.1.3 The radical Italian Western

Power in Western has always originated from the barrel of a gun. According to Fisher (2014), the plots in the movies of Western genre often revolve around topics like noble rebellion in defense of a small community, ambivalence towards centralized government, and hostility to codified law. In these movies, the West is often represented as a disappearing remnant of a dying age (Fisher, 2014).

From 1950s onwards, the cultural hegemony of the United States in the West became very apparent, as the youth of Europe adopted American popular culture with its focus on consumerism and mass culture. Fisher explains, that as the influence of the American popular culture spread, the youth of the Europe emulated and borrowed the habits of their American counterparts. However, according to Fisher, instead of just mere imitation, this transatlantic borrowing should rather be considered as a process of negotiation and reinterpretation. Especially as this Americanization was often not seen in as solely positive development. (Fisher, 2014.)

However, the myth of the Wild West became highly popular throughout the Europe after the World War II, and this led both real and imagined America to become a natural setting of popular entertainment in all genres (consider for example Tex Willer, Lucky Luke and so on). As Fisher (2014, 22) notes, “the Wild West was, and is, at once the most recognizable and the most escapist

manifestation of American [...] imaginary". At the same time the Western genre acted as an escape valve for social tension during the era of swift modernization. (Fisher, 2014.)

In Westerns, not only do a belt, a holster and a gun appear to be a part of man, but violence, in any form, is atypically something to be condemned. Violence, however, is exactly the thing, which separates Italian Western from its American counterpart. As Fisher argues, while the Hollywood Westerns justified the violence as a grave duty, a regulated code or a last resort, Italian filmmakers stripped their Westerns of any such morality. (Fisher, 2014.)

These films were highly popular and produced on the industrial scale. Fisher notes that almost 500 films were produced between 1962-80 with various trends from slapstick to horror. He describes 1960s as a time of political turmoil throughout the West and states, that the legitimacy of the use of violence by the state was popular in the minds of the protest movements on both sides of the Atlantic. This was reflected on the wave of movies as well. According to Fisher, the radical Italian filmmakers took the Western genre, ignored its moral values placed by previous generation, and filled it by addressing contemporary issues in direct and radical terms. (Fisher, 2014.)

As Fisher argues, these films aimed to illustrate the symbiotic relationship between violence and power in bourgeois society and thus, attempted to expose apparatuses behind the Western societies. He notes that these films were radical, because they functioned as vehicles for the dissemination of far-left political ideology and condemnations of advanced capitalism. Fisher argues that "with varying levels of seriousness and political commitment, these films condemn Western society (in both senses: The Wild West and bourgeois liberalism) as a syndicate of cruelty,

corruption, and coercion” (2014, 80). After analyzing these films, Fisher (2014, 81) recognizes four different plot variants common to the radical Italian Western;

1) The Foundation Narrative (1964-67)

- A lone hero rides to town divided by two factions or clans
- *Per un pugno di dollari* (1964)

2) The Transitional Plot (1966-68)

- A historical backdrop is placed into the “foundation” narrative to widen the scope of the characters’ actions
- *Django* (1966) and *Il buono, il brutto, il cattivo* (1966)

3) The Zapata-Spaghetti Plot (1967-71)

- Places a gringo and a Mexican in an uneasy partnership revolving around the Mexican revolution
- *Corri, uomo, corri* (1968); *Il Mercenario* (1968); *Companeros* (1970)

4) The Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) Plot (1967-71)

- Consistent determination to unmask an outwardly civilized society where covert mechanisms are predicated on violent tyranny
- *Faccia a faccia* (1967); *Il Grande Silenzio* (1968)

(Fisher, 2014.)

RDR series makes use of all these categories, but the most apparent is the RSA Plot. This category adopts Althusser’s understanding of ideology not as force of nature, but something in existence only if society is regulated by the state (Žižek, 2008; 19). These films mainly depict the law as an overwhelmingly repressive force and the state as an absolute enemy (Fisher, 2014). In them, a

society is governed by violence, corruption and deceit (Fisher, 2014). As such, the worldview offered in these types of narratives possess parallels with modern critiques of Western capitalism and neoliberal values (Fisher, 2014).

Thus, this thesis defines *RDR* games as open world adventure video games, which utilize the genre of Spaghetti Western for their narrative elements. These games clearly share a combination of family resemblance and appeal factors with both, open world adventure video games and the Spaghetti Western, thus these genres provide a useful perspective for an analysis of *RDR* games. The understanding of the traditions of these genres becomes crucial for a holistic understanding of *RDR* games as cultural artifacts.

2.2 VIDEO GAME LITERACY

It is apparent that video games are a medium of their own, and the tools developed to study other forms of media are not enough to be literate with video games (Zimmerman, 2008). According to Oxford Dictionaries (2020), literacy refers to the ability to read and write. Writing video games could be considered as a capability to design to them, but how are video games read? What it means to be literate with video games? This chapter of the thesis considers the main components and concepts needed to become literate with video games from an academic perspective.

Video games are a participatory medium, where the game experience is generated in co-operation between a designer and a player (Zimmerman, 2008; Murray, 2017). Video games are also in large part a visual medium and understanding of video games as texts or cultural artifacts can vary considerably. Eric Zimmerman (2008) argues, that there is a set of skills and competencies that are crucial part of being literate in the 21st century. The basis of his definition of this new literacy is in

the understanding of three concepts; 1) system, 2) play and 3) design. To Zimmerman, to be literate with video games means that one can understand and create specific kinds of meanings by approaching a video game as a designed system of play. This system only becomes a meaningful as it is inhabited, explored and manipulated by players. Thus, as Zimmerman argues, a video game is a designed context to be encountered by player(s), from which meanings emerge. However, he emphasizes the importance of not only focusing on understandings that appear inside the magic circle of a game, but also how a game relates to the world outside of that circle. As video games are not fixed objects, but rather a set of possibilities to be encountered, other literacies are not sufficient enough to understand them. (Zimmerman, 2008.)

Zagal (2010) identifies this new literacy as ludoliteracy, and defines it consisting of three context-specific factors. The first factor is the ability to play games; the second refers to the ability to understand meanings relating to games, and third to the ability to make games. Even though all these factors are important, Zagal places his emphasis to the understanding of meanings generated by video games. These meanings are understood by enacting knowledge. (Zagal, 2010.)

Hayes and Gee (2010, 69) state, that “new literacies do not replace old literacies, but rather change their place in the overall ecology of meaning-making practices in a society”. To their understanding, video games fuse writing and reading in a more essential way than other literacies. Hayes and Gee define the reading of a video game as an understanding of the design features and content of the game. They approach the concept of writing a video game and state, that writing a video game means that one is capable to enact a game by playing it. They offer their definition of video game literacy as “a family of different practices engaged in by different social groups with a variety of cross-cutting similarities and differences” (Hayes & Gee, 2010, 69). Thus, it can be argued that to be

literate with video games, means that video games need to be understood not just from cognitive context, but social, cultural, historical and institutional contexts as well. (Hayes & Gee, 2010.)

Bourgonjon (2014; 3) shares this idea and states, that one can only be considered literate in “a specific discourse when they master the signs and codes in semiotic context”. He offers academia as an example of such semiotics and states, that “becoming academically literate thus implies decoding and demystifying what it means to be an academic in order to participate” (2014; 3). He emphasizes the importance of a critical literacy, which he characterizes as challenging dominant perspectives. Thus, “the idea of a single and neutral literacy becomes untenable” (Bourgonjon, 2014; 3). Video games cannot be approached like traditional text forms as video games are similar-but-different to other texts. To him, to be literate with video games translates as a capability to examine a video game from three perspectives; 1) operational, 2) cultural, and 3) critical. (Bourgonjon, 2014.)

First perspective, operational literacy means that one is capable to reading and writing video games. To Bourgonjon (2014), reading and writing refers to one’s ability to play and design video games. Second perspective, cultural literacy refers to an understanding of texts in relation to specific contexts. This is described as the ability to

explain, discuss, describe, frame, situate, interpret, and/or position games in the context of human culture (games as a cultural artifacts), in the context of other games (comparing games to other games, genres), in the context of the technological platform on which they are executed, and by deconstructing them and understanding

their components, how they interact, and how they facilitate certain experiences in players.....[or] in video game culture”. (Bourgonjon, 2014; 7.)

The third dimension, critical dimension,

requires the knowledge that video games are a social construction, access to the public debates about the meaning and position of video game culture, the skills to participate in these debates, and an attitude that pays attention to and respects the different, often conflicting perspectives aired in these debates. (Bourgonjon, 2014; 8.)

By these definitions, it becomes crucial that the understanding of video games is based on well-informed, critical perspective. Thus, it can be argued that video game literacy is a necessity to fully grasp the expressive potential of video games. As stated, being literate with video games demands a rather holistic approach. For example, to play video games as a hobby or designing levels for a platformer, does not provide necessary skills or competence to be literate in video games. Rather, this thesis proposes that video game literacy requires mastering many different aspects, in addition to recognition that different contexts affect to how one understands a video game. By acknowledging that games are not fixed objects and not created in a vacuum, one can start to take steps towards more sophisticated understanding of video games as an expressive medium, similar-but-different to literature, movies or other forms of expressive media.

2.3 VIDEO GAMES AS RHETORICAL TOOLS

Video games have become highly popular and mainstream. They have not only become an important part and influence of popular culture but have started to shape reality itself (Muriel &

Crawford, 2018). As Donovan (2010) describes, operational logic behind early video games was to eat as much pocket money as possible by keeping the players playing the game. Contemporary video games can be multiform narratives where players get to experience detailed worlds, and their own choices often shape the environment they inhabit (Murray, 2017). Donovan (2010) summarizes this change in two points. First, video games moved from arcade halls to our homes and are now being constantly with us. Second, the storytelling in video games has evolved from somewhat overlaid themes and linear narratives to more sophisticated multiform plots with emphasis on choice making and player freedom (Muriel & Crawford, 2018; Murray, 2017).

This is clearly observable in the titles like CD Projekt Red's *Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt* (2015). In addition to which order and how a player chooses to approach the different missions and tasks of the game, the player also often has multiple choices how to resolve different issues and thus, has a say how the game world evolves. The game's ending is dependent on the choices a player has made and for this reason can be different from a player to a player. The role of a game designer is thus becoming more and more like that of a cyber bard envisioned by Murray (2017). As Murray predicted, the storytelling in video games is becoming increasingly just about setting the world in motion and then stepping back to let the plot unfold, mirroring the role of Game Masters in live action role-playing games (Murray, 2017).

Zizek describes the developments in cyberspace as a move from the modernist culture of calculation to the postmodernist culture of simulation. For us to understand how the machine or simulation works has become an increasingly demanding task. As users, we become accustomed to technology we operate and the machinery behind it retreats into invisibility. (Zizek, 2008.)

This thesis argues that this also illustrates the technical developments in video games. As Bogost notes, even though playing a game is much about learning its rules, their mobilization of various rhetorical resources helps to construct highly formulated cultural artifacts, possibly confusing players of what is really being learned. Thus, according to him, video games should be considered as powerful rhetorical tools, which make use of multiple rhetorical resources simultaneously, including audiovisual design, storytelling, character development, mechanics, gameplay and so on. This means that a game cannot be examined thoroughly by focusing only on one rhetorical resource, but rather, to fully grasp the meaning making potential of a game, all these elements are needed to take into account for. Thus, to Bogost, video games open a new domain for persuasion, the procedural rhetoric, which he refers to as “the art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions” (2007; ix). He notes that, compared to other forms of computational expression like word processors and different apps, video games have unique persuasive powers, because they are also cultural. Bogost states, that procedural rhetoric is useful for concept for both, the game designer and the player, since it functions not only as a technique for making arguments, but also for unpacking arguments created by others. (Bogost, 2007.)

Similar notions are made by Mäyrä. According to him, video games can be conceptualized to consist of two layers, a core and a shell. A core includes the gameplay elements, and a shell the representational elements and sign systems. To be able to fully grasp the nuances of the video game expression, both layers are needed to consider, as only together they form a whole. (Mäyrä, 2008.)

In addition to a core and a shell, it is also crucial to remember that a video game only becomes once it is enacted (Zimmerman, 2008; Murray, 2017), so as a participatory medium, the role of a player is needed to take into an account as well. As Murray notes

computer is a procedural medium, it does not just describe or observe behavioral patterns, it embodies and executes them [...] and as a participatory medium, it allows us to collaborate in the performance. (Murray, 2017; 223.)

This notion becomes particularly important when the aim is to analyze video games from scholarly perspective. As Zagal (2010) notes, the students of game studies often have a hard time separating between approaching games as gamers and as scholars. He lists four reasons why this has proven to be a challenging task;

- 1) Prior experience with video games might interfere with a student's ability to reason critically and analytically about their research subject.
- 2) This often translates to difficulties of articulating and describing their experiences and observations.
- 3) To fully experience a video game requires that a student has the skillset required to play them.
- 4) Technological issues make it a demanding task to experience older games, thus making it often hard to understand the history of development of video games. (Zagal, 2010; 60.)

As Zagal notes, this is clearly observable from a difficulty "to shift from treating a game as a 'consumer media good' to a cultural artifact that can have embedded meanings and ideas" (2010; 58). These issues are also emphasized by the fact that, as an emerging field game studies lacks established traditions, and this is often making it hard to fully grasp how to approach video games from an academic perspective. However, as Zagal notes, this also provides a unique opportunity,

because the academic study of video games translates to a possibility to go where no scholar has previously gone. (Zagal, 2010.)

As Murray correctly envisioned two decades ago, contemporary open-world video games have become richly immersive interactive entertainment, in which we experience an adventure “that is driven by the guest’s curiosity rather than by rushes of adrenaline” (Murray, 2017; 57). Contemporary open world video games with extensive maps and a non-linear gameplay, for example, enable and foster emergent narratives. (Murray, 2017.)

In a sense we are approaching the holodeck experience, an experience that is “more real than reality, but still clearly make-believe” (Murray, 2017; 27). Murray adopts the concept of holodeck from *Star Trek: The Next generation* (1987), where the holodeck functioned as a virtual reality environment which used holographic projections to make it possible to interact physically with the virtual world. In contemporary mainstream culture, the concept of holodeck experience has become highly popular. Not only in the medium of video games, but in other forms of media as well. Maybe the best contemporary example of this is the TV series *Westworld* (HBO, 2016-), which depicts a Western-themed theme park populated by lifelike androids. In the series, the visitors of the park are enabled to experience their dreams and desires with the help from these androids.

Similarly, for a long time, Rockstar games have been obsessed with creating worlds that feel as lifelike as possible (McDonald, 2018). The subject of a case study in this thesis, *RDR* series, shares many similarities with the *Westworld*. For example, Rockstar North’s studio co-head, Rob Nelson, describes Rockstar’s creative aims in *the Guardian* interview as

to build worlds that people believe in, that they can get lost in, that is living without you, there for you when you come to it. We want as little as possible to remind you that people made it [...] The similarities with Westworld [...] It's not that it's a western and we're a western [...] It's that we're trying to make another world that you can go in and interact with and believe in. Just like they are. (MacDonald, 2018.)

Game worlds form complex, highly manufactured and thoroughly designed totalities, in which some things are made visible while others remain hidden, thus, engaging in construction of a particular worldview (Mitchell 2017, Murray 2018). Considered this way, video games become fantasies that are “enacted within a fully realized simulation of a world, which sees itself inevitable, although it is not” (Murray, 2018; 144). As such, they can be considered to contain social and political ideologies, which are disseminated through video game experiences (Murray, 2018). These experiences are powerful, because we tend to consider them as our own (Muriel & Crawford, 2018).

2.4 OPEN WORLD ADVENTURE VIDEO GAMES AS AN EXPERIENCE

If we examine contemporary open world action adventure games for example, they promise us the experience of a life in ancient Greece as an assassin (*Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*, 2018), a 31st century post-post-apocalyptic world inhabited by digital dinosaurs as a hunter (*Horizon Zero Dawn*, 2017), a land plagued by monsters and war as a monster hunter (*Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt*, 2015), and life as an outlaw in the Wild West (*RDR*, *RDR2*), just to name a few recent examples. Video games are obviously catering to our need of escapism (Muriel & Crawford, 2018; Calleja, 2010), but also operate as ideological apparatuses, designed and programmed for rendering a player a simulation of a certain world or reality (Quijano-Cruz, 2008). For example, all the examples mentioned above

encourage a player to understand the world in certain way ultimately denying other possibilities from existing at all (Mitchell, 2017; Murray, 2018).

We are still far from Murray's (2017) ultimate holodeck experience, where players can do and act as they will. When considering highly successful contemporary open world adventure games, for example, they often offer a free world to explore, but to experience the narrative, player must succumb to the designer's vision and advance through the story in a predetermined way. There can be a number of ways to succeed, but it is crucial to keep in mind that everything possible in these worlds is there by design (Zimmerman, 2008; Murray, 2017; Murray, 2018). In a sense, players through the tools that the game provides, build the story for themselves by playing the game (Zimmerman, 2008; Murray 2017).

Zizek (2017; 2-3) considers that "our immersion into the digital space can be experienced in two opposed ways of free floating and of total control". This is most clearly visible in contemporary open-world games. Even though these videogames seem to, or even promise to, offer a player unlimited freedom, this freedom is largely illusory and in fact, a player often has a little agency to determine a game world's events and outcomes (Mitchell, 2017). Therefore, these kinds of video games offer a directed freedom or as Muriel and Crawford (2018; 88) describe it, "experiences of experiences ". A player's freedom is always limited by the game's own restrictions and possibilities (Mitchell, 2017; Murray, 2018). By creating a context for a player to encounter with, a game aims to make a player's motives coincide with goals of a game, designed for a game world's future to be enacted (Zimmerman, 2008).

Thus, a player is always following the options given by the game (Mitchell, 2017). As Mitchell (2017; 77) argues, “the player doesn’t really make any choices that the game has not already made for them”. Understood this way, players are invited to enact someone else’s experience (Muriel & Crawford, 2018). This line of thought is actualized in *the Assassin’s Creed* (2007-) games, where a company called Abstergo offers people an opportunity to experience the lives of their ancestors in different time periods. In these games, the player character has access to experiences and memories of someone else. The games build representations of different time periods, ranging from ancient Egypt to industrial London of the 19th century. The game worlds they provide are built with an aim to historical accuracy (MacDonald, 2018b). Through their main storylines, a player is offered an opportunity to meet historical figures in historical settings. However, while stories of these games are fictional, a player’s actions are limited with “this historical person did not harm innocent” - notifications, for example. Thus, even if their narrative elements are fictional, the consideration of the use of these spaces for educational purposes has garnered attention of both, researchers and game companies (Donald & Reid, 2020; MacDonald, 2018b). This notion highlights the sophistication and the detail these game worlds provide.

However, it is important to remember that the game is always controlling the player by placing restrictions on possibilities open to them. Mitchell argues, that even though a player is inhabiting an open world, nothing truly unexpected can ever happen. He notes that the game world “is enacted at the player’s behest, even while it is designed to feel as though it were a living and breathing thing” (Mitchell, 2017; 61). The player is the center of the game world, because without the actions of a player, the passage of time changes nothing. Mitchell states, that no other medium offers the participant such a total control over time. A player of a game has a chance to save and reload, die and respawn, speedrun and cheat and so on. As such, a player is free to explore, exploit,

question, and bend the rules of the game, but the game is also free to punish a player. Thus, as Mitchell argues, even though contemporary open world video games seem promise us almost unlimited freedom, every choice available for a player has already been made. (Mitchell, 2017.)

Galloway (2006) makes a similar notion about time and space in video games, and states that

[...] time and space are mutable within the diegesis in ways unavailable before. Games have the luxury of being able to exist outside real, optical time. Games pause, speed up, slow down and restart often. But more than that, they can also transpire in moment of suspended time, [...] where the player plays solely during the interstices between other actions. (Galloway, 2006; 66.)

To Galloway, video games are the first medium to adequately utilize the first-person subjective perspective. He refers to this as “active” vision, and its used in games to create identification. Because a player’s movement is beyond a game designer’s control, a game design depends upon the construction of a complete game world beforehand. Video games utilize the “active” vision to facilitate an active subject. This position then empowers a video game’s apparatus. (Galloway, 2006.)

However, a game does not force the player the to do anything. If a player chooses to spend his time by riding around with a horse, a player is free to do so. What is important to note here, is that a game won’t recognize it as much of a progress. Thus, when considering ideological underpinnings of virtual worlds, it can be argued that a progress through a video game’s story missions becomes an important aspect of its experience. As Mitchell (2017) argues, video games act as power fantasies

for a player, because they all offer a player chance to learn and master its algorithms. Considered from this perspective, one can conclude that by internalizing a game's mechanisms a player is at the same time absorbing its ideology.

Video games have been argued to allow players to express their identity and autonomy. One way to understand this is described by the self-determination theory by Ryan & Deci (2004). The theory is based on examination of a person's psychological needs on which one's intrinsic motivation and identity are built upon. According to them, when a person acts voluntarily, he behaves in a way that expresses his own identity and his own will. However, these activities can also be controlled by external factors, if a player finds them meaningful and valuable (Meriläinen, 2020). As Meriläinen (2020) notes, for a player, the act of play responds to the need for self-determination through both, the act of play itself and a game's content. This is because playing video games can be considered as a voluntary act with an aim for enjoyment, and where a player has plenty of choice as to what to play, how to play, when to play, and with whom a game is played (Meriläinen, 2020). Thus, examining the act of playing through the self-determination theory might offer insights to understand a player's game experience (Meriläinen, 2020).

In this sense, video games are devices we operate, but also devices that operate us (Mitchell, 2017; Bown, 2018). Bown (2018; 6) compares videogame experiences to dreams and notes that "the video game world is a space that constructs and transforms our dreams and desires". He adopts Walter Benjamin's view of dreams, for whom a dream was less something imagined when in sleep, but more like something experienced when walking in modern space absorbing its signs and signifiers. Similarly, in video games we are bombarded with information in various forms. We have been given this promise of freedom, but someone else gets to say what it consists of. Bown (2018; 76) argues

that “when we play, we fall into a dreamlike gamer state, and the affinity of the player and the role they play is about a complex connection between the unconscious of the gamer and the unconscious of the game”. To him, immersion is thus less about making the game experience seem as real as possible and more about the “interpellation of the player to this dream state in which the game can have the greatest effect” (Bown, 2018; 86). A video game then allures a player to express his freedom, however this freedom is defined by a game’s designers. To Bown, this means that not only do video games reflect unconscious dreams, wishes, and desires, but they also construct new ones. Thus, desire is becoming algorithmic and video games play a crucial role in its reorganization. (Bown, 2018.)

The main concern for Bown is the increasing potential for the corporate control of the desire itself. He argues that in a large part “the rhetorical power of video games is about naturalizing dreams, wishes, and desires of a political moment by making a player experience them as their own” (Bown, 2018; 77). Even though Bown can be criticized for considering a player to be an almost helpless automaton (cf. Meriläinen, 2020), he explains thoroughly why we should be concerned about the future politics of video games, and technology overall. The development of these experiences requires a lot of resources, thus restricting the possibility to construct them in the hands of a few. The darker side of the game industry is characterized by intense working conditions, race and gender oppression, and the centralization of wealth and power in the hands of a few major media conglomerates. This is alarming, especially, when we consider that the experiences, we have in front of our screens are easily considered apolitical. This is also in part the blame of the game industry itself whose games garner publicity and a sense of a cultural relevance but avoid the challenge of controversy, and often deny any topical intent. However, video games convey meanings and

messages, whether intended or not, and thus the analysis of who gets to speak and what is spoken in and through these worlds becomes crucial. (Bown, 2018.)

2.5 POLITICS OF THE OPEN WORLD ADVENTURE VIDEO GAMES

In fact, all video games should be considered political, because “they institute a way of thinking and acting in their design and because they interpellate the player through pleasure” (Mitchell, 2017; 57-58). Video games make arguments through their stories and mechanics, for example, and should thus be considered as spaces of ethical and political potential (Mitchell, 2017; Murray, 2018). The aim of the game designers is to create consistent and compelling game worlds, which immerse a player, and thus make a player to invest in the experience (Mitchell, 2017). To Mitchell (2017; 63), “immersion and investment are preconditions for political and ethical experience”. Because video games operate procedurally, they all exercise procedural rhetoric (Bogost, 2007). They persuade a player to accept a certain world as inevitable. These experiences are shared by many; thus, video games also have an important role in the formulation of collective imaginary (Murray, 2018). Murray (2018) argues that video games are highly formulated cultural constructions, because the images produced in video games are carefully and thoroughly designed, and as such, correspond to particular value systems and worldviews. Thus, it can be argued that game designers craft laws that convey certain ideology by rendering only some things possible (Murray, 2018). By naturalizing this cultural and social construction, video games represent a game world as if there were no alternatives (Murray, 2018).

As such, it is argued that the rhetoric of neoliberalist freedom is ever-present when considering video games as experiences (Muriel & Crawford, 2018; Murray, 2018; Gunkel, 2018). From this perspective, not only are they reproducing the idea of player’s freedom to choose, but also to

understand their lives in terms of a choice (Muriel & Crawford, 2018). More importantly, they also place the responsibility of the consequences of these choices solely on the player (Muriel & Crawford, 2018). However, all these consequences are there by design, reflecting the dual nature of control in virtual worlds also noted by Zizek (2017) and Mitchell (2017).

When considered as social and political realities, these worlds can be argued being capable of offering us alternatives to the world we currently live in. In a sense, a video game constitutes a “new world” or “frontier”, which exist for the player to explore, colonize and exploit (Gunkel, 2018; Murray, 2018). However, the use of concepts of the “new world” or “frontier” are not neutral (Gunkel, 2018; Murray, 2018). As Gunkel (2018) notes, the concept of the “new world” refers to European encounters with the American continents in the 15th and 16th centuries, and the concept of the “frontier” to the western movement of white European settlers. Thus, both concepts are solidly rooted in a European (and in some sense white American) experience and understanding (Gunkel, 2018; Murray, 2018). The “new world” implies that there was a free land (America) which existed to be occupied, and it also it implies that there is an “old world” somewhere too (Gunkel, 2018). The “frontier” works as a kind of a national ideology, by explaining the advance of the white settler society westward and describing it as progress and development (Murray, 2018). As Murray (2018) notes, game space is often organized as the representation of the land through its use-value for the player and everything placed in these environments exists with a sole purpose to be consumed. In this sense, they connect the exploration of game spaces with European colonial exploration and neoliberal capitalism (Gunkel, 2018; Murray, 2018). Not only by considering everything through its use-value, but also underlining the need for the constant creation of new desires to be satisfied (Murray, 2018; Bown, 2018).

However, considered from the Marxist perspective, all video games become inherently revolutionary in a sense, that the aim of a player is always to capture the State power by mastering the game. Thus, the roles of a player and a game resemble the roles of the ruling class and the proletariat in the Marxist Theory of the State. Adopting the Marxist position then, proposes that the idea of the class struggle is also ever-present when considering video game experiences. A game sets the rules and enforces them by either rewarding or punishing a player. Contradicting the view proposed by Muriel and Crawford (2018) above, from the Marxist perspective “the attribution of personal responsibility and guilt relieves us of the task of probing into the concrete circumstances of the act in question” (Žižek, 2012; 5). Thus, an analysis of what is possible and what is acceptable in a game world reveals insights into its ideological underpinnings. If video games are playable representations, and representation is the frontline of power relations, then in fact, it can be argued that a player is playing in the frontlines of power relations in every moment of gameplay.

To conclude, as cultural artifacts “video games not only reflect wider social issues, but they also shape those social matters and drive their transformation” (Muriel & Crawford, 2018; 5). Thus, video games become sites where “dominant shared codes find their form, are communicated, are interrupted, or are resisted and reformulated” (Murray, 2018; 5). They can be argued not only to be significant part of the mainstream culture, but also a participant in the discussions which shape our understanding of the world. As Bown (2018; 8) notes, “the dialectic interplay between the reality and the virtual is a site at which the future can become visible”. Thus, this thesis argues that as the expressive potential of video games is getting more sophisticated, the need to develop the tools of their critical analysis is becoming increasingly necessary.

3 LITERATURE REVIEW

In the previous chapter, a theoretical framework to study the political and ideological underpinnings of video games was formulated. This chapter examines earlier studies of Althusser and video games. In the second part of the chapter, the focus is shifted towards to the other studies of Rockstar's games. These studies highlight the multitude of approaches that are applicable to video games. However, what becomes apparent, is that even though these studies present different findings; they all participate in the discussion on how to better understand video games as cultural artifacts in an academic context.

3.1 ALTHUSSER AND VIDEO GAMES

Garite (2003; 5) argues, that "video games operate on players through updated, aggressively interactive and immersive form of interpellation". He (Garite, 2003) shares the understanding of how to utilize Althusser's theory for video games as presented in the previous chapter of this thesis. For him, Althusser's theory of ideology and repressive and ideological state apparatuses is suitable for video games, because they "grant players unprecedented degree of freedom and control, while simultaneously bombarding them with relentless series of limits and demands." (Garite, 2003; 7). Garite expresses a concern with the work of gaming by noting that the focus should not be only on the "cognitive and physical labors of players, but also the ideological work performed by games themselves" (2003, 8).

Quijano-Cruz (2008) argues that Althusser's apparatuses can in fact be located in most works of literature, film, and video games. He adopts Foucault's model of an ideal prison, which "is in itself an ideological state apparatus and a repressive state apparatus at the same time" (Quijano-Cruz,

2008). These apparatuses have their set of rules, and if those rules are broken a player will face punishment. Because of the power relation present in video games, a player learns that these apparatuses are acceptable, thus they also strengthen a player's belief in the game world. Through these apparatuses, a player is then effectively experiencing considerations and ideals of the characters.

When considered from Althusserian perspective, the State power and the State apparatus are controlled by a video game's designers. The game enforces all kinds of rules on players, making them accept their submission by forcing them to choose their freedom from premeditated choices. Thus, a video game's institutions "call out" or "hail" a player and offer a particular identity and induce a form of behavior, which a player accepts as natural or obvious, based on the feedback given by the game world. A game's rules, its in-game police force, state, army etc. can be considered forming a game's RSA. An in-game media, religious organizations, in-game culture, and in-game legal and political system are some of the ISAs present in these worlds. However, what is noteworthy here, the ISAs of video games do not necessary resemble their real-life counterparts. What this means is, that a video game's side quests and other activities and tasks can be also considered its ISAs. Even though they do not resemble institutions of the real world; they can be considered as institutions of a video game world.

3.2 OTHER STUDIES OF ROCKSTAR'S GAMES

Game studies is a multidisciplinary field, and this is highlighted by the various approaches and methods applied to the study of Rockstar's games. In this section, other studies of Rockstar's open world adventure games and *Red Dead Redemption (RDR)* series are briefly presented. The findings of these studies are contrasted to the findings of this thesis later in chapter 6.

Pérez Latorre (2015) proposes a new analytical model for identifying the underlying values and ideologies in popular video games. He argues that video games transmit meaning essentially through the language of ludic design, which he defines as a combination of the game rule design and formal patterns of the game play. Thus, for him, video games offer a new way of constructing discourses. His model is based on three features of a game;

- 1) The rules of the game world
- 2) The representation of the character/player
- 3) The representation of the game world and the actions carried out in it.

(Pérez Latorre, 2015.)

He applies this model to Rockstar Games' *Grand Theft Auto (GTA) IV* (2008) and finds that its social discourse is concentrated on the struggles of an immigrant in contemporary America. It offers a player a world, in which a life of crime is the easiest way to riches, which is equaled as success. (Pérez Latorre, 2015.)

Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009) connect *GTA* series to the modes of inequality and marginalization inherent to contemporary capitalism. They argue that during a gameplay player inhabits the ludodrome, which they refer to as a “mediated space between immersion in urban simulation and a real world” (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; 157). Their aim is to understand the political nature of game worlds, the way in which the game worlds are informed by dominant relations of power. For them, *GTA* series is about the dynamic of global capital's urbanization. Their analysis finds game worlds as ideal of neoliberal values, where financial concerns define the rules

of the game. They note how *GTA* series often has protagonists which “are drawn from the multiethnic, transnational, nomadic proletariat” (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; 179).

But there is nonetheless a manifestly reactionary aspect to *GTA*’s vision of universal corruption. What is excluded from its virtuality is any alternative to the rottenness. It is, in fact, vital to the ideological consistency of the games’ demonic satire that brutalization, racism, and greed be ubiquitous. There may be other options; but you can’t play them— and that is what makes *GTA* a game of Empire. (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; 180).

Thus, *GTA* series makes visible some basic functionalities and insincerities of neoliberal economics, politics, and culture. All *GTA* series’ game worlds then, share the idea that their world, their reality, is the only alternative and thus the only way to live. (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009.)

Humphreys (2012) analyzes *RDR* from the (Western American) Literary Studies perspective. She sees that the power of the frontier is to narrativize the discourse of neoliberalism, which in Westerns is typically depicted as progress and freedom. To her, *RDR* is a part of these narrative apparatuses that dramatize neoliberalism. Although she acknowledges that video game spaces can also be realities where the voices of counter-publics are dealt with, according to her, these views are dismissed in *RDR*, because the player assumes a role of a cowboy, who must be individualistic conformist. She concludes that,

perhaps there are cultural and social benefits to working one’s way through a game and figuring out the narrative paths that will lead to greater glory and profit, but I am

more hopeful that open world games [...] can create counternarratives that resist the ways in which a game like *RDR* supports exceptionalism, neoliberalism, and even white supremacy. (Humphreys, 2012; 213.)

Pallant's (2013) study on *GTA IV* (2008), *RDR*, and *LA Noire* (2011) focuses on the balance of control between the player and the game, and how the changes in this balance shape how the player experiences the game world. He finds that in these Rockstar's games increasing emphasis placed on narrative coherence is clearly visible. Pallant notes for example that,

[The] use of character dialogue as a method of narrative exposition during the play rewards the gamer not just through its enrichment of the narrative, but also in the way it allows the gamer to participate in the delivery of narrative through their continued control over the character's movement (be it on foot or in a vehicle). (Pallant, 2013; 150)

Crucial to the maintaining the coherence of narrative is the balance of control between the player and the game. One of the key notions made by Pallant is that, "although the increasing control exerted by Rockstar over the gaming experience has [...] enhanced the narratological impact of their games, it has come at a cost" (2013; 153).

Triana approaches *RDR* by studying its view of masculinity. He's study examines "the potential for the specific masculine construction [...] to cross the game's boundaries and influence the worldview of the player" (Triana, 2015; 2). He's central finding is that *RDR* offers an alternative masculinity. According to him, *RDR* renders a world where one finds marginalization as a better alternative than

to live within a society controlled by repressive and coercive forces. Triana identifies *RDR* as a comment on the rapidly transforming American society of the early 1900s. He sees that “the Marston’s story exposes that danger social forces may pose to the individuals they are supposedly serving” (Triana, 2015; 15). To him, ideologies and meanings found in video games are noteworthy, because a player will use these experiences to navigate real-world social contexts. (Triana, 2015.)

Westerside and Holopainen (2019) focus on inspecting of how place is experienced in contemporary videogames. *RDR2* creates “a dynamic gameplace in which site and landscape are crucial components in how we understand, experience and interpret it as a cultural artefact” (2019; 4). They adopt Humphreys’ (2012) perspective of *RDR* performing ideologies centered on neoliberal values and see it an apparatus that dramatizes neoliberalism. However, *RDR2* is found to be more progressive than its predecessor, as it echoes 21st century liberal values. They, conclude that, *RDR2* employs player’s “encounters with place to generate its weight of feeling” (Westerside & Holopainen, 2019); thus, making the game world not just a space to roam in, but a world to exist in.

Bagnoli utilizes Althusser’s theory to examine *RDR2* in his master’s thesis and it is included here because the specificity of the subject. He considers how *RDR2* conveys a discourse over another era from Althusserian perspective. Similar to this thesis, he sees video games as part of cultural ISA. Bagnoli closely analyzes the representations of the RSA (the police and the army) and ISAs (the church and the family), and finds that *RDR2* is conveying progressive ideals like feminism, anti-racism, and opposition to the traditional values. (Bagnoli, 2019.)

According to Morgan, *RDR2* poses no challenge to existing conceptualizations of hegemonic masculinity, whiteness, or the Western genre tropes. He notes how the control between a player

and the game shifts from one extreme to another, but the narrative in these games progresses linearly. He recognizes how the game world justifies the violent acts as a necessity for the common good. One of the key findings for Morgan is, that in *RDR2* hegemonic masculinity is portrayed as natural, rather than socially constructed behavior. To preserve its hegemony, hegemonic masculinity of *RDR2* utilizes violence. For him, *RDR2* thus, works to advocate and justify dominant cultural ideologies such as hegemonic masculinity and whiteness. (Morgan, 2020.)

Donald and Reid approach the use of video games, and their validity, within education by using *RDR2* as an example. They note that, while *RDR2* is not a game that teaches history, it invites players to learn about certain time period. This requires that the game world in question has a historical grounding. They conclude that by playing in the sandbox, players might grasp the world of the protagonist better. At least, according to them, it reflects our cultural understandings and interpretations of the American West. (Donald & Reid, 2020.)

4 METHODOLOGY

While above, the focus of the thesis was on how to understand ideological aspects of video games, and examined how they are understood by other researchers, this chapter considers a suitable method for this kind of analysis. This thesis produces an understanding of video games as ideological apparatuses. To achieve this, an analysis of a video game is performed by applying a formal analysis in combination with critical analysis, a method described below. As Mäyrä (2008; 165) states, “playing games is the most crucial element in any methodology of game studies”. This chapter begins by outlining key issues that need to be considered when performing this type of analysis of video games. In the following section, the thesis presents the reader with a conceptualization of a formal and critical analysis.

What is crucial to remember here, is that each of us perceive reality differently. Thus, one cannot escape his own background, and one’s previous experiences have at least some influence on how a (game) world is perceived (Muriel & Crawford, 2018). Thus, each person is going to decode the meaning of a cultural object in a unique way based on their circumstances in life (Murray, 2018). As Muriel and Crawford (2018; 89) explain, players occupy, often simultaneously, at least three frames of cognition:

- 1) The primary, “common-sense”, understanding of themselves and their situation within a wider social context
- 2) Identity and experience as a player of a game, with its own specific rules and patterns of play
- 3) Character in that particular game.

By acknowledging that games are not fixed objects and not created in a vacuum (Flanagan & Nissenbaum, 2014), one can start to take steps towards sophisticated understanding of videogames as an expressive medium, similar-but-different to other forms of expressive media (Bourgonjon, 2014). As scholars, we should avoid offering our critical analysis of a game as a fundamental truth, but rather to consider them as a frame, or viewpoint, from which to participate in a wider discussion on expressive potential of the medium (Bourgonjon, 2014). This means that a scholar's subject position, history, and cultural context all shape one's game experience (Bourgonjon, 2014). To be able to examine video games in a systematic way, this aspect is crucial to consider and explicitly acknowledge.

Another important aspect to consider is that of an access (Gunkel, 2018). As Gunkel (2018) notes, for many, the decision to migrate to a virtual world is not something they get to consider. Gunkel's (2018) main concern is, that the technological developments are making the divide between information haves and have-nots deeper in alarming scale. As he (Gunkel, 2018) notes, not only is the world divided to technologically developed societies and the third world, but this divide is present also inside the technologically advanced societies, where everyone can't afford to acquire the latest gadgets and games. However, this is not solely technological or financial issue, as one needs to also acknowledge the efforts of various state-level and corporate actors to gain control in cyberspace around the world (Bown, 2018). The critical analysis of video games should, thus, aim to question the worlds created and place emphasis on political rationalities they offer (Gunkel, 2018). As the game worlds can be utilized to offer us escapes to possible utopias, the tools the medium provides can also be used as a repressive force (Bown, 2018).

To study these worlds necessarily requires one to adopt many roles simultaneously (the role of a player, the role of explorer, the role of a scholar and so on) (Gunkel, 2018). A game world encourages ways of thinking about a space, and even though they are not completely dictating our understandings, they can be rather persuasive (Murray, 2018). They not only set forth certain value systems, but they also always deny other possibilities (Mitchell, 2017). As Murray (2018) argues, video games are “affective fictions critical for our imaginative capacities to envision potential [...] eventualities”. To Gunkel,

these synthetic new worlds [...] offer economic and social opportunities, provide a location for innovative and unheard-of adventures, and even support grand utopian experiments and new forms of community. (2018; 53.)

4.1 FORMAL AND CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Game analysis is a difficult and multifaceted concept and its meaning rather hard to grasp. Fernández-Vara (2015, 56-57) divides game analysis into three aspects: the context, game overview, and formal aspects. The study of a game’s context enables one to situate game historically, culturally, socially and economically. A game overview places its focus on the features of a game that distinguishes it from others. However, the center of attention in this type of analysis are the formal elements of a video game. Formal elements of a video game include for example, the rules of the world, the relationship with the rules and the fictional world, values and procedural rhetoric and the representation. According to Fernández-Vara (2015), this type of game analysis interprets the structure of the text of a video game. Its main questions thus become, (1) how the game is presented to the player, (2) how it works, (3) why it is so, and (4) how this relates to the player’s

experience. As Janet Murray (2017; 143) argues “games can also be read as texts that offer interpretations of experience”.

Lankoski and Björk (2015; 23) describe formal analysis of a game as a method “for research where an artifact and its specific elements are examined closely, and the relations of the elements are described in detail”. A formal analysis can be performed either approaching the research subjects as artifacts or activities. However, often utilization of both perspectives is necessary, because both, components of a system and how they interact with each other, is crucial to consider. This method relies heavily to playing a game and understanding of how a game’s system work based on that. This understanding should be separate from any specific gameplay instances. In formal analysis, the systemic features of a game (including game elements, rules, and goals) are described and these parts are compared by which they play in the composition of whole. In practice, a part of a game or parts of games are chosen to be placed under scrutiny. Then by playing the game, most crucial parts in terms of the research in question are researched further. As Lankoski and Björk (2015, 34) note, formal analysis can be used in conjunction with other methods. In this thesis, it is used in conjunction with critical analysis to consider political and ideological underpinnings of a game. (Lankoski & Björk, 2015.)

Thorough critical analysis of these worlds, then, might give us insights into our own reality. According to Gunkel (2018) the role of critical analysis of these worlds is to distinguish and expose a video game’s structure, its operations, and its implications. By examining the fundamental operations and conditions of possibility, one can consider the meaning-making potential of a game, but also its potential for inducing a form of behavior (Pérez Latorre, 2015). According to Murray (2018), the importance of analyzing mainstream video games can be summarized in four points:

- 1) they resemble the mass culture industry;
- 2) they are commanding force within visual culture;
- 3) they have a mass appeal and thus are constitutive of mainstream ideologies;
- 4) the culture does not only reflect reality, it also participates in the production of it.

In this sense, a game world can only be truly understood by relating it with the context of its non-game space (Murray, 2018). This means that one needs to acknowledge the background from which a video game's representations and signifying practices arise from and not only place focus on the world inside "the magic circle" of a game (Zimmerman, 2008).

Video games adopt means from other media but are not restricted to their logics (Murray, 2017). Rather, the critical analysis of a video game should account to the distinguishing properties of the medium, i.e. rule-based architecture, player agency, interactivity, gaming as cultural phenomenon and so on (Flanagan & Nissenbaum, 2014). As such, video games indeed become like Bownian dreamworlds, where our dreams and desires are reflected, controlled, constructed, and transformed in myriad and subtle ways. As cultural objects they are interpreted from several points of view, and because video games are played, they are not always seen in the way that the designers originally intended (Bogost, 2007; Murray, 2018).

In fact, it can be argued that video games themselves oppose the idea of being played the "right way" (Mitchell, 2017). This is due to the fact, that inherently video games do not often separate between right or wrong way to play. In the context of this thesis, this translates as a fact that the game does not force a player to play its story missions. However, the game doesn't recognize this kind of behavior as a much of a progress. If a player chooses to ignore the story missions, he willingly

ignores a large part of the game. From ideological perspective this can be considered as a failure by the game's designers, because in these instances the interpellation of a player is not successful. Thus, while games like *RDR* make it possible to be experienced as cowboy simulators, the game's mechanisms do not induce this kind of behavior (at least not from the narrative perspective). Rather, by giving the most lucrative rewards on completion of its story missions, it calls or hails the player to focus on them. Thus, by choosing to play *RDR* as a cowboy simulator, the player ignores not only the experience of the narrative elements of the game but may also consider its ideological underpinnings radically differently.

Muriel and Crawford (2018; 86) argue, that "video game experiences are at the same time individual, unique, and contingent, but also collective, shared, and stable". According to them, video games actively take part in the process of re-imagining social reality as a set of staged experiences. They conceptualize video games as themed environments or theme parks. (Muriel & Crawford, 2018.)

At their most basic level video games consist of code and a game engine, which are often borrowed from other games. In themselves they lack a history and identity, but when a theme, identity or brand is imposed upon them, they become exciting and spectacular game experiences. (Muriel & Crawford, 2018; 100.)

To them, video game experiences find their meaning when they are reflected, shared, compared, contrasted and connected with other experiences, and in other's experiences. (Muriel & Crawford, 2018.)

To Bizzochi & Tanenbaum (2011), close reading is a way of, at the same time, revealing the faults of a text, and commemoration to the ways in which it generates meaning. Close reading is a suitable tool for uncovering different aspects of a video game. Bizzochi & Tanenbaum (2011) consider that close reading is applicable to gameplay experiences. The close reading of a video game creates an understanding of its design and experience. Thus, close reading of a video game might even provide new insights of the medium itself (Bizzochi & Tanenbaum, 2011).

The data of this thesis consists of experiences of these staged experiences. For the purposes of this study, both installments of *RDR* series were played through twice (*RDR* on xbox360; *RDR2* on PS4). During the playthroughs, notes were collected and then reflected to formulate an understanding of these game worlds and experiences they provided. These experiences were then analyzed to find the ideological underpinnings of the games by examining them from Althusserian perspective. In the analysis, the focus was placed solely on the single player story experience. After the analysis, the made observations and notions are contrasted on other's findings.

5 ANALYSIS

This chapter of the thesis provides an analysis of *Red Dead Redemption (RDR)* games. The first section of the chapter formulates an understanding of the games' context. An analysis of the context of a video game makes it possible to situate it in historical, cultural, social, and economic perspectives. In the second chapter, this thesis offers an overview of *RDR* games, performs an analysis of their rules and gameplay, and conducts a close reading of *RDR* games in the form of formal and critical analysis. The formal elements of a video game; rules of the world, relationship with rules and the fictional world, values and procedural rhetoric, and representation are included in the analysis to provide insight in the ideological underpinnings of these games. In the third section, these experiences are considered from the Althusserian perspective, to offer an understanding how these games function as ideological apparatuses and the ideology they are designed to disseminate.

5.1 CONTEXT: ROCKSTAR GAMES AND THE ROCKSTAR METHOD

It is safe to say that as highly popular artifacts of mainstream culture, Rockstar Games' games have had, and continues to have, a massive influence on the (videogame) culture. As such, Rockstar Games participates, like the radical Italian filmmakers earlier (Fisher, 2014), in this kind of cultural negotiation and reinterpretation, by examining the American history and society through the genre of the Western from the multicultural, but considering the company's Scottish origins, predominantly European, perspective.

Most Rockstar titles are videogames for players over 18 years old, and thus their content should be analyzed as products for mature audiences. Rockstar's most famous and popular franchise is *Grand*

Theft Auto (GTA, 1997-) series. GTA franchise is a series of open world adventure games, where players are inhabiting contemporary urban environments. Even though GTA games are placed in imaginary America, their connections to the real one is evident. By playing the games, players get to experience, as virtual tourists, the fictional versions of the 1980s cocaine-era Miami (*GTA: Vice City*, 2002), the 1990s Los Angeles with its gangbangers (*GTA: San Andreas*, 2004), and the 2000s New York City by the eyes of a mafia made man (*GTA III*, 2001), and an immigrant (*GTA IV*, 2008). Thus, even though each entry of the series is a story of their own (each have their own protagonist, own story and so on), they can easily be grouped as whole, because they all focus on examining the darker side of the American dream.

They all bring forth a highly satirized version of the American society (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Pérez Latorre, 2015). Each depict someone marginalized from/by society trying to survive in contemporary America. However, the protagonists never seem to be able to escape the life of crime, which in the Rockstar's universe, seems to be the only way to riches. Interestingly, at the surface level these games seem to suggest that success equals with individual's richness, but when examined in-depth they become radical criticism of this very notion (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Pérez Latorre, 2015).

Especially from *GTA III* (Rockstar's first three-dimensional open world game) onwards, players are invited to explore, and experience open worlds filled with violence and cynical humor. A player is offered a full freedom to act as they please in these environments. In addition to main story missions, all these spaces contain also a plethora of various activities for a player. Thus, a connection to the line of thought of video games as theme parks presented earlier (see p. 46) is clearly observable.

The brilliance of expression in these titles derives just from that. There is a possibility for a player to, in some sense, try to make it by doing honest work and having healthy hobbies. However, the more a player invests in the life of crime, the larger the economic benefits become. When examining social and political resonances found in these games, it becomes evident that only way to become successful (rich) is to choose the life of crime. Thus, when considered critically, Rockstar's open world games become criticism of capitalist and neoliberal values (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Pérez Latorre, 2015). As such, they paint a cynical worldview where the most respected citizens are psychopathic lunatics, and all the positions of authority and power are in fact occupied by criminals or at least somewhat shady individuals, whose only motivation is to get rich and powerful.

Story wise, these titles borrow a lot from movies. In fact, many of these titles work as homages to different form of genre cinema/TV. For example, *GTA III* is evidently a homage to crime and gangster films (*the Godfather* (1972, 1975, 1991), *Goodfellas* (1990) , Italian poliziotto of 1970s and so on), *GTA: Vice City* owns heavily to *Scarface* (1983) and *Miami Vice* (1984-1990) and the like, and *GTA: San Andreas* to American gang/hood movies like *Clockers* (1995), *New Jersey Drive* (1995), and *Boys in the Hood* (1992).

Rockstar Games' *RDR* series carries on this tradition. However, the focus is put on the early 20th century America and the genre adopted is Western, more specifically the Italian take on the genre often referred to as the Spaghetti Western (Fisher, 2014). Even though not explicitly stated to belong in the same universe, many similarities with *RDR* and *GTA* series' can be observed. Even the games themselves seem to flirt around the idea of them happening in the same universe, as they both include the same location names, they share a religious cult and Easter Eggs, like in *GTA V*

(2013), one playable character has a bookshelf, which has a book called Red Dead written by J. Marston (it remains unclear whether this refers to John or his son Jack Marston), just to name a few examples.

5.2 GAME OVERVIEW: RED DEAD REDEMPTION (RDR + RDR2)

This section provides a game overview of *RDR* series. In the following sub-sections, thesis performs an analysis of their rules and gameplay, and conducts a close reading of these games in the form of formal and critical analysis. *RDR* and *RDR2* are Western-themed open world adventure video games developed by Rockstar San Diego and published by Rockstar Games. *RDR* series' two parts, released almost a decade apart, both received commercial success and critical acclaim by both critics and players.

Rockstar Games' *RDR* series offer a player an imagined representation of a historical point in United States' history. To be more precise, the story of the games takes place between the years 1865 and 1914 in an imaginary version of the United States. While *RDR* focuses on the end of the fictional Van Der Linde gang, *RDR2* recalls the story of the early exploits of the gang. In *RDR* player assumes the role of John Marston, a former outlaw hunted by his criminal past, while the early exploits of the gang in *RDR2* are experienced mostly through the character of Arthur Morgan. *RDR* was first published in 2010 for PS3 and Xbox360, and *RDR2* was released on Playstation 4 and Xone in October 2018. Both installments were later released on personal computer (PC) as well.

As described above, *RDR* games are typical Rockstar Games' open world adventure games. They offer a player a huge world filled with plethora of activities. However, to progress through the story, a player is not taking a part in a complex multiform narrative, but rather following a linear script,

since the games' ends are always the same and narratively a player doesn't have a say on almost any important decisions.

This is an aspect that makes the analysis of open world video games particularly difficult task. There are several activities in which a player can participate in addition to main story missions, like side quests, robberies, bounty hunting, fishing, hunting, gambling and different chores. Thus, the experience of playing these games might vary drastically from player to player. Some players might play these titles just to enjoy for the main story, while others might not play the story missions at all. This is highlighted by the fact that even though *RDR2* was the biggest selling game of 2018, only 22% of the PS4 players had completed the story by the end of January 2019 (Treese, 2019). This implies that many play these games with focus somewhere else than the main storyline these games provide. In addition, both titles include online multiplayer modes, and *RDR* even has a horror themed DLC called *Undead Nightmare* (2010). In this thesis the focus is on experience provided mainly by the main story. Thus, the emphasis in play was put mostly on progressing through the story, not as much in free exploration of the world.

Fundamentally, both *RDR* games consists of two "empty" vessels, the game engine (RAGE) and the genre (Western). When they are combined, they construct an open world, which possesses a full reality by itself. This reality is molded by linear narrative story missions and emergent narratives, to formulate an almost lifelike ecosystem, where a player gets to experience life of the last outlaws. However, as the player character and his story are predetermined, a player has a little to say on what and how the character or the game world becomes. Artificially, like many other games, these games promote neoliberal values and consumerism (everything exists to be consumed, land is there

to be conquered, everything has numerical value and so on). However, when examined closely, more nuanced expressions of values and ideologies, even radical ones, begin to emerge.

5.2.1 The rules and gameplay

This sub-section offers an analysis of the rules and gameplay of *RDR* games. It examines the representation of the game world, the acts in it, and the implications of those acts in relation to ideological underpinnings of these games.

The game mechanics of *RDR* games combine for example racing, escaping, and shooting. As mentioned above, as a system these games promote neoliberal values (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Pérez Latorre, 2015); Murray, 2018). The game world exists solely for the player to explore and consume (Murray, 2018). Even though the game aims to simulate a lifelike ecosystem, it can be argued that there is no reason for anything to exist but to amuse and to be consumed by a player.

The main missions provide a player with larger economic benefits, while the side quests and other activities provide smaller benefits or exists solely to entertain a player. Considering that the Van Der Linde gang is having financial troubles, a player is pushed towards completing main missions to sort out the gang's problem. The main missions of the game are largely about various criminal activities; thus, the discourse of these games seem to imply that acquisition of wealth is acceptable by almost any means necessary. However, *RDR2* promotes the idea of redistribution of wealth, because in it the stealing is justified, when the victims of the crimes are the rich.

The games also introduce an honor system, where bad and good acts move the scale between heroic and unheroic behavior. By doing good deeds, like helping other citizens or lawmen give rise to a

player's honor level. High honor level rewards a player a better pay on jobs, and discounts from the games' merchants. Stealing, unnecessary violence, and murder are considered acts which cost honor. A player with a low honor level, however, can enjoy the benefits of being able to bribe eyewitnesses with less money, or even scare them to silence, and discounts in the black market. The position of the scale affects how Non-Playable Characters see a player, when he moves around in different areas of the game world. However, honor seems to be a problematic concept, because even if a player commits to play through the game as heroic as possible, he must commit unheroic acts to play through the story missions. This means that a player is made not only rob and kill, but also made to unnecessarily beat up hostages during train robberies, for example. Interestingly, these games do not see killing always to be morally wrong. In *RDR2* a player can come across some members of the white supremacist organization Ku Klux Klan in the woods, however killing them doesn't cost a player any loss of honor. In this instance, the game reinforces certain behavior by the in-game mechanic of "honor". By not punishing a player for killing the Klansmen, the game's rules (the rules of the world) seem to imply that killing racists is okay. Or at least, that racists are something to ridicule and opposition to them is acceptable by any means.

5.2.2 Formal and critical analysis

In this sub-section, this thesis performs a close reading of *RDR* games in the form of formal and critical analysis. The approach chosen for this thesis proposes chronological examination of the narrative elements of the games. Thus, the analysis begins with early exploits of the Van Der Linde gang (*RDR2*), and then the end of it (*RDR*). This is done, because as this thesis argues, it affects to the understanding of the ideology of these games.

Outlaws for Life

In *RDR2*, the Van Der Linde gang forms a kind of a society of their own. The game highlights in many parts the fact that the player character is not working solely for himself, rather his aim is to achieve prosperity for the whole collective. The gang's leader, Dutch Van der Linde, motivates the player by promising this beautiful utopia of peace and harmony, which can be achieved by with just a little more money. As the player progresses through various missions and tasks, the player has the option to donate a part of his earnings to gang's collective stash. During missions, the player gets to know the members of the Van Der Linde gang and their families. The main characters of the gang, in addition to Dutch, Arthur and John, are Abigail Marston, Jack Marston, Sadie Adler, Javier Escuella, Bill Williamson, Charles Smith, Micah Bell, Lenny Summers, Uncle, and Hosea Matthews.

The gang has chosen to live outside the established society and the law. It was founded by Dutch and Hosea, who rule the gang with iron fist, even though especially Dutch is first represented as a charismatic idealist. Hosea Matthews is an expert con man and a thief, who has been Dutch's closest friend and an ally for a long time. He is presented as a skillful talker and possessor of wisdom. Other members of the gang are formed by a group of criminals, dissidents and other marginalized groups. Abigail Marston is the love of John Marston's life. They have a son, Jack, who will play crucial role in the formulation of the ideology of the game. Sadie Adler is a bounty hunter and a grieving widow on a mission to take revenge on men who killed her husband. Javier Escuella is Mexican revolutionary, on the run of the Mexican state. Bill Williamson is an ex-soldier, who after his dishonorable discharge turned to life of drinking and violence. Charles Smith is fighting specialist of the group. Due to his origins as a child of a Native American mother and African American father, he has spent his life on the run, until he found his place in life with the gang. Micah Bell is a wild and unpredictable criminal and hitman, who was saved by Dutch and thus, he decided to join the gang.

Lenny Summers is depicted as smart, educated and competent man, who is always ready to work. Uncle is a funny man of the group, who doesn't like to work, but provides a good company. The cast of the games function as an important ISA. They exist in the game to attribute to the narrative coherence of the game world, but also by offering a player various side quests and tasks, their function is to interpellate a player to invest in the story.

The gang commits various criminal acts which drive them into conflict with multiple opposing forces. These include for example wealthy oil tycoon Levictus Cornwall and the Pinkerton Detective Agency. The gang plots to rob the assets of Cornwall, who responds by recruiting the Pinkerton Detective Agency to hunt down the gang. The Pinkerton Detective Agency is led by Agent Andrew Milton and his subordinate Agent Edgar Ross and they become central figures to the story. Especially Agent Edgar Ross proves to be an important character in the forming of the world of *RDR* series. Ross sees civilizing the West as his mission and is willing to fulfill his mission by any means necessary.

Dutch controls the gang with an iron grip. Multiple times he addresses the gang and promises them a future of peace and prosperity in Tahiti. The better times ahead could be achieved by fulfilling Dutch's plan, which he multiple time addresses as "I have a plan, we rob Uncle Sam and leave". Unfortunately, the nature of this utopia is not described further. However, considering that the gang functions by everybody contributing to the collective stash, which is then shared, the gang seems to be in favor of socialist values. For them, life isn't about the survival of the individual but collective. As the story progresses, a player gets emotionally invested with the gang and in one sense, by continuing to complete the tasks and missions, starts to believe in Van der Linde's promise of utopia. Or at least that is the game designers' intention. However, at any point of the game, player can "check the books" to see what other members of the gang are bringing to the table. It soon becomes

evident that the player, as Arthur Morgan, is the most generous contributor to the “common good”. After finding out that he is terminally ill, Morgan starts to see through Van der Linde’s lies, and starts to get a sense that the gang wasn’t about the prosperity of the all in the first place. The gang starts to fall apart and Morgan places he’s focus on saving a few of the “right-minded” friends (namely John Marston, Uncle, Sadie Adler, Charles Smith) and prepare himself for a final confrontation with Van der Linde and his remaining loyalists. Disappointed in his life, he pleads John to change and leave the gang life behind.

It is, as if, the game tries to imply that we had our chance to build a better community (multicultural socialist utopia?), but the selfish egoism of our fellow humans prevented that from happening and thus, the “real” America, the real land of the free, is forever lost. A player gets a cold handed remainder that there is no honor among thieves. It is also a traditional story about how power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. If the utopia for the Van der Linde gang was built upon a Robin Hood-ish scheme of robbing enough money from the rich to start a self-sufficient community somewhere in Tahiti, it only worked as a façade for Dutch Van der Linde to motivate his gang to keep committing crimes for his personal gain. When considering the gameplay, Van der Linde gang is in fact unsaveable, because no matter how much money a player collects to the gang, it remains chronically poor.

After Morgan dies, a player assumes the role of a fellow outlaw, John Marston. John gets lost during the final train robbery, and since Dutch can’t locate him, he is left behind to die. However, Marston survives and finally achieves his dream of living a peaceful life with his family. In this he finally succumbs to the state and accepts his destiny. The game even congratulates the player for this submission in the form of a bank manager who states, “Congratulations! You are now a real

American, indebted and owned by the bank!", when John is applying for a loan to buy a farm. His life becomes filled with mundane tasks of a ranch life, until his past finally hunts him down. Even though his wife pleads him to stay on straight path, a life of violence is inescapable for John. "We all get caught eventually John, you just need to decide by who", as Dutch so eloquently puts it.

Interestingly, this notion of human greediness mentioned above, is emphasized in the story of John Marston experienced in *RDR*. In an almost anarchistic fashion, a player is told to not trust no authority except themselves, when the representatives of the state capture Marston's son and wife, extorting John to hunt his former gang members. John makes a deal, agreeing to help if the state promises his freedom.

Outlaws to the end

RDR begins by John confronting his former gang member Bill Williamson. It leads to a violent stand-off, at the end of which Bill shoots John and left him to die. His life is saved by the rancher Bonnie McFarlane. Feeling indebted to Bonnie, John decides to help her by running various errands around the ranch. After a while, he starts to get into contact to other local residents, who little by little drive John to commit more and more serious crimes.

After running various errands for the snake-oil salesman (Nigel West-Dickens), dysfunctional alcoholic (the Irish) and psychotic graverobber (Seth Briars), to attain their help to complete the task given by the state, Marston finds himself in the middle of revolutionary Mexico. As in the Zapata-Spaghetti plot described by Fisher (2014), in *RDR* Mexico is depicted as backward, degenerate and exotic. The revolutionary war is fought between colonel Augustin Allende and revolutionary Abraham Reyes. Marston joins the fight on both sides of the war. In the end, he chooses to help the

rebels led by Reyes to win the war, thus enabling the revolution in Mexico. To Marston, this choice is made more out of personal loyalty than ideological judgement. This highlights the cynical fact, that no matter who is controlling the government, they are never representatives of the people's real interests. In turn, this implies that the real revolution is a never-ending struggle. As such, it is also ridiculing the view that neoliberalist capitalism is the experience of deliverance from the constraints of ideology. It doesn't necessarily enforce any other form to be better but promotes the idea that we should pay close attention to our surroundings. If not to revolt, at least not to leave anything unquestioned. However, during the revolutionary war, John manages to kill Bill Williamson and Javier Escuela, leaving Dutch Van Der Linde to be the final gang member to hunt down.

John returns to United States and he befriends with a Native American named Nastas and obscure ex-Yale professor Herold McDougal. With their help John discovers Dutch's current whereabouts and that he has started again to propagate his utopia to a new band of followers. Finally, Marston gets to confront Dutch. With Bureau of Investigation and US army on board they take on Dutch and his new gang. An epic battle ensues, at the end of which Dutch ends up committing suicide, thus freeing John from more killing, as if it anymore made any difference.

John returns to his home ranch, where his wife Abigail and Uncle are waiting for him. His life becomes peaceful again and he focuses his attention to teach his son how to be a rancher. However, the peace is abrupted quickly, when the government agents accompanied by US army come to visit the last remaining members of the Van Der Linde gang. By killing John, the state reveals its true coercive nature by betraying its promise of freedom to John.

Even though John was murderous outlaw he was committed to change, and the deal with the government was to his actions to grant him his freedom, it was shown that the government can't be trusted. However, the game's story doesn't end by the demise of John. A couple years after his death, Jack Marston decides to pursue the outlaw way of life. Revenge on his mind, he is committed to hunt down the man who he sees responsible for his father's death. Jack tracks down the recently retired Edgar Ross and challenges him to a duel. Jack gets his revenge by killing the man who double crossed his father, and the Marston legacy continues to live on.

RDR is largely about mourning of a lost way of life. John Marston, the player character, can be described as an idealist. As the power is falling into the hands of faceless corporations, Marston's actions can be considered as acts of resistance of the neoliberal ideals driven forth by the state. Thus, the discourse of neoliberalism in *RDR* is in fact not about freedom and progress, but more that of repression and coercion. To John, the realities beneath the façade of law and order in a neoliberal society are clearly observable, thus making him desire the "real West", where the function of the government would be the prosperity for all, instead of the few.

John Marston becomes a revolutionary, in a sense, that he refuses to accept the "only option of neoliberalism", and thus making the state to be something to fight against. This façade is even made explicit, when the state forces return to murder John, after he has completed his task; despite promising him his freedom.

Long live the alternative

While *RDR* mourns the loss of a way of life, in *RDR2* the alternative ways to neoliberal capitalism still exist or at least a dream of them is still alive. In *RDR2* alternative is presented by depicting a utopia,

as in there is the possibility for something else than neoliberal capitalist society, and this utopia could be achieved. The game world of *RDR2* pushes forward progressive values like ridicule for racism, support for women rights movement and so on. More importantly *RDR* series shows potential for a gaming canon that is both mainstream but still radically progressive in content.

While it is evident that Rockstar criticizes neoliberalism, at the same time it also questions the personal motivations of progressives and the viability of their goals. However, the game lets the dream of the alternative (revolutionary utopia) to live in Jack. Jack is the third playable character in *RDR* series, although player gets to control him only briefly in the final chapter of the story. However, his role proves to be crucial when analyzing the ideological aspects of *RDR* games. If John Marston represents the idealist, and Arthur Morgan's role is that of a martyr who gets betrayed by his own comrades; Jack Marston represents the educated youth, a version of new kind of woke man.

Oxford dictionary (2020) defines being woke as alertness to injustice in society. Jack is being homeschooled by his mother, loves books, rather picks flowers than participates in fishing and so on. However, Jack is also keen to learn from his father and in the end of *RDR* chooses to continue his father's way of life. Thus, while John and Arthur represent more rough and rugged versions of masculinity, the role of Jack is to represent a new version of a man, implying that the revolution's future is at the hands of this woke and educated youth. From this perspective, *RDR* games also become an apparatus of woke gaming, which is refers to "video games [that] mirror and embody the injustices we see throughout popular culture and in society at large" (Gray & Leonard, 2018; 5).

5.3 RED DEAD REDEMPTION AS AN IDEOLOGICAL APPARATUS

This section provides an understanding of *RDR* games as an ideological apparatus. It is based on thinking of Althusser presented in the chapter 2. However, it utilizes the theoretical framework presented in the chapter 2, and also adopts as a backdrop the other studies of these games presented in chapter 3. As stated, video games function as ideological apparatuses on two levels. They are a part of larger group of cultural ISAs, but they also render the world of their own, where their own ideological apparatuses are simulated (Quijano-Cruz, 2008).

Rockstar Games is unquestionably a part of the mass culture industry and the games they release can be described as mainstream video games. As Murray states, video games can be considered a commanding force within visual culture, thus they are in position of not only reflecting reality, but also to produce it. They play a crucial part in constitution of mainstream ideologies by contrasting, reshaping, discussing and reflecting different social and political issues. Video games also participate in the forming of collective imagination. By being cultural artefacts and a form of art, they provide a platform for players to experience different types of social constructions and political systems. (Murray, 2018.)

What is noteworthy here, is that Rockstar Games as a company is also a part of video game industry. While, as this thesis proposes, its open world games contain progressive values, as a company it seems to betray the very ideology it seems to promote in its games. Rockstar Games is often portrayed as a controversial figure of the video game industry (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Pérez Latorre, 2015). This is not solely due to controversial content in its games, but it has been multiple times publicly accused of being a repressive workplace with excruciating crunch periods (Schreier, 2018; Sinclair, 2018; Berry, 2019; Badenhorst, 2019). Sinclair (2018) reports former

employees detailing mandatory long working hours, unpaid overtime and the atmosphere at the workplace being a culture of fear. Sinclair quotes one former developer

There was a lot of managerial pressure to work these long hours [...] Even if they didn't flat out say the words 'required' and 'mandatory', they would say things like 'we need to start working more hours' and 'we're going to have to start ramping things up' [...] They loved to be ambiguous and not actually give a set number of hours to start, as well; just leaving it up to people to do themselves.

(Sinclair, 2018.)

In the aptly titled article “Inside Rockstar Games’ Culture of Crunch”, Jason Schreier (2018) describes Rockstar Games’ as being renowned for cutting and redesigning big portions of their games. This often leads to considerable modifications to its narrative, the core gameplay mechanics, and the game’s overall presentation. Schreier writes,

It’s a process that some see as essential for making a game of this nature, but it’s also one that leads to a great deal of overtime, and has contributed to a culture of crunch at Rockstar Games that is impossible to deny, according to interviews with dozens of current and former employees. This isn’t crunch that came in a burst of a few weeks—it’s crunch that, those employees say, has lasted for months or even years.

(Schreier, 2018.)

This leads one to question the human cost of making these types of video games. For example, the development of *RDR2* took eight years with over 2,000 staff members (White, 2018). As reported

by Goldberg (2018), the script of the main story consists of about 2,000 pages, and to bring that text to life required 2,200 days of motion capture work with 1,200 actors. The final version of the game includes 300,000 animations and 500,000 lines of dialogue. Thus, the scope of the game is enormous. Because the real cost of making these titles is not public information, one needs to rely on educated guesses. Takanashi (2018) offers this kind of estimate of the costs and ends up with a vast sum of roughly one billion dollars. Rockstar might be the only game company in the world, which can spend this much time, money, and manpower on a single title. Rockstar Games' culture of crunch became public over a decade ago. As a company, it has only acted to better to condition of its workers after the release of Schreier's article (Tierney, 2019). Thus, interestingly, Rockstar Games seems to from ideological perspective act in the way they so much criticize and ridicule in their games.

However, the game worlds they have designed construct a lifelike ecosystem, which can be analyzed from Althusser's perspective. Rockstar Games have developed themselves a game engine, designed to construct worlds where inherently the road to success (equaled as riches) is always related to a life of crime. This notion is the very essence of ideological apparatus at work in these video games. Thus, they share a similar view presented in the radical Italian western films and condemn neoliberal capitalism as a syndicate of cruelty, corruption, and coercion (Fisher, 2014). This ideology is enforced by filling the game world with of different ISAs to disseminate the game's ideology to the player. These ISAs consist of different institutions of the game, which interpellate a player to participate in various tasks to progress the story. From narrative perspective, for example money, which is equaled as success by the game's rules, is in fact almost without relevance, since no matter how much money a player collects, the result of the game remains the same.

From Althusser's perspective, the Van Der Linde gang assumes the role of the proletariat. Even though the gang's objective isn't necessarily the destruction of the State, as it is for the proletariat in the Marxist theory of the State, their aim is still to hold the State power of their own. Thus, if they had been successful in establishing their utopia, they would have had control over the State power and thus the State apparatus of their own. However, their hope of utopia was crushed by its leader succumbing to selfish egoism and finalized by the emergence of the neoliberal State. The State, which is depicted as adamantly seeing itself as an only civilized way to live, thus, justifying for itself the violent repression of the alternatives.

What we see here, is the similar method utilized by the radical Italian filmmakers earlier, being transferred to video games. What Rockstar Games have done, thus, is that they took a genre and filled it by addressing contemporary issues in direct ways. *RDR* games can be contextualized as a genre fiction, as they utilize many of the themes and tropes of the Western genre, and particularly the Spaghetti Western, as described above. These installments even contain scenes and settings borrowed directly from the movies they are paying homage to. For example, the Fort Mercer assault mission from *RDR* is almost directly from *Django* (1966), the mission called Tall trees is from *Il Grande Silenzio* (1968), and the setting in the revolutionary Mexico resemble a lot of that from *Per un pugno di dollari* (1964).

RDR2 tells a tale of desperate bandits who are fleeing from powerful and insane psychopaths, who are running the state. The state is governed by violence, corruption, and deceit, and the law is a tool by which the most vicious psychopaths get rich. The state as such, is then depicted as an absolute enemy, making the social reality of Rockstar's Wild West a lot like one in envisioned in the Repressive State Apparatus plots described by Fisher (2014). A player is told that he is fighting a

good fight (for utopia, robbing the rich to give to poor), but it soon becomes apparent that the end of history, in the form of neoliberal capitalism, is here and a player is fighting a losing battle. Only way to resist the state, or advance one's alternative ideals, is by revolt, crime and murder. The absolute cruelty of the state is later made clear, when John Marston is extorted to hunt down his former gang members and even by complying, still ends up being betrayed.

Not only does this underline the inevitability of the hypercapitalist state later emerging in *GTA* series (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Pérez Latorre, 2015), but also, doom other alternatives to always fail. Even both games' slogans seem to highlight this. While *RDR2* positively proclaims "Outlaws for life", *RDR*'s more pessimistic "Outlaws to the end" implies the inevitability of what is to come. This also echoes contemporary reality, where it is, as Žižek (2012; 1) notes, easier to imagine the end of the world than to seriously consider alternatives to neoliberal capitalism. However, one can also read it as a parody of neoliberal exceptionalism. By making the "only alternative of neoliberal capitalism" a reality, *RDR* series ridicules the arrogant selfishness of neoliberals themselves and thus advocates resistance to it, both culturally and politically.

Considered as a whole, Rockstar's open world games (*GTA+RDR*) build a view of the history of the America developing from the wild to the hyper capitalist theme park. This thesis considers that as *RDR* series focuses on laying building blocks and foundations of future society to come, *GTA* series simulates this society in effect. The revolution almost died with the Van der Linde gang's demise, but as a small beacon of hope continues to live in the margins, when the son of John, Jack Marston, decides to continue the outlaw way of life. However, the society was left to be managed by the evil forces of technology, corporations and bad government.

This becomes explicit in *GTA* series, and thus offer an interesting subject for further study and analysis. While *GTA* series works as critique of neoliberalist developments in the West (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Pérez Latorre, 2015), especially from 1979 onwards (Reagan & Thatcher eras), *RDR* series focuses on describing the loss of the alternative. *RDR2* particularly works in opposition to Trump and the alt-right movement in that it emphasizes not the success and survival of the individual but the whole community.

6 DISCUSSION

This thesis began by introducing the reader to the conceptualizations of video games as political and ideological landscapes, and consideration of the relevance of Marxist approach as a critique of capitalism and its neoliberal manifestations. Thesis also offered a justification for utilization of Althusser's theory of ideology to video games and contemplated the importance of studying ideological aspects of mainstream video games.

The second chapter offered a theoretical framework based on previous research of video games. In this part of the thesis, the focus was placed on examination of understandings of video games as rhetorical tools, as experiences and political nature of these experiences. First, thesis presented key concepts of the study; Althusser's theory of ideology and ideological apparatuses and video game literacy. Chapter ended by offering definitions of open world adventure video games.

The third chapter conducted a literature review of previous research on Rockstar's open world games, with an emphasis on other studies of *Red Dead Redemption (RDR)* series. What becomes apparent, is that as a research subject, *RDR* and specially *RDR2* have garnered increasing interest from the scholars. The multiple viewpoints from which to approach the subject in these studies also highlight the multidisciplinary nature of the field of game studies. This can also be observed from their results, which often provide contradictory conclusions. However, they all contribute to the discussions of the expressive potential of the medium. As it was emphasized by Bourgonjon (2014), important aspect of video game literacy is the ability to debate and participate in debates concerning the subject of the study. Thus, this chapter compares, contrasts, and reflects the findings

of this thesis to the other studies, and thus, participates in the discussion with other scholars to better the understanding of video games as cultural artifacts.

Video games can be considered as a part of the cultural ISA (Garite, 2003). They are one of the cultural institutions that participates not only in the reproduction, but also the production, of the dominant ideology (Garite, 2003; Murray, 2018). However, video games themselves contain their world of own ISA and ISAs (Quijano-Cruz, 2008). Quijano-Cruz (2008) draws parallels with Althusser's theory and video games. His (Quijano-Cruz, 2008) understanding of every video containing this Althusserian apparatus of ideology, proved to be a crucial contribution, when formulating considerations of this thesis.

Interestingly many of the other studies of *RDR* games see John Marston as a cowboy (Humphreys, 2012; Triana, 2015; Westerside & Holopainen, 2019). However, this thesis argues that Marston is an outlaw. He is a cowboy only in small parts of the story. A life of a cowboy works as a dream for John, as he tries to leave the outlaw way of life behind. Both, Humphreys (2012) and Westerside & Holopainen (2019), see *RDR* advocating neoliberal capitalism, which contradicts radically with findings of this thesis. However, Westerside & Holopainen (2019) view *RDR2* containing more progressive messages, thus their views somewhat agree on what is contended in this analysis.

This might be due to the fact that this thesis situates both *RDR* games as a part of ongoing commentary on contemporary Western society in Rockstar Games' open world adventure video games. Compared to *GTA* titles for example, this thesis argues that *RDR2* becomes revolutionary in the sense that it provides a player an implication of another possible world, which in Rockstar's games is often denied (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Pérez Latorre, 2015).

Pallant's (2013) notion of how *RDR* uses character dialogue as a method of narrative exposition during the play highlight the power relation present in the games. While a player is in control, the game apparatus keeps hailing and reminding the player of its existence. Thus, this can be considered as the games ISA at work par excellence. Like Morgan (2020), this thesis finds the power relation in these games changing from one extreme to another. However, considered from narrative perspective, the power is held tightly by the game, since a player's actions do not influence the game world's outcome.

Similar to this thesis, Bagnoli (2019) connects *RDR2* with Western genre movies. He also utilizes Althusser's theory of ideology and ideological apparatuses to video games. However, in this thesis, the utilization of the theory is taken a bit further, by considering also different ISAs particular to video games. He, thus, recognizes the RSA and ISAs in similar but more direct manner. In this thesis, the interpellation of the games is also considered from the perspective of how they hail a player to progress in the game, while Bagnoli mainly considers the how different apparatuses are represented. Thus, he recognizes the utilization of the ISAs to promote progressive values but doesn't consider how they as a whole push forward the rejection of the coercive and repressive state represented in the game.

Morgan (2020) posits himself more in line with studies by Humphreys (2012) and Westerside & Holopainen (2019) in that it finds *RDR* conveying the ideas of hegemonic masculinity. Triana (2015) examines the view of masculinity represented in *RDR*, and similarly to this thesis conclude that the game is largely about rejection of the masculinity provided by the surrounding society of the game world. While this thesis sees the game's content almost revolutionary, Triana (2015) concludes, that *RDR* is thus a world where marginalization is seen as a better alternative than to live within a society

controlled by repressive and coercive forces. Morgan (2020) notes how the game justifies criminal activities, because they are committed out of a necessity for the survival of the community. However, he does not grasp the potential of this notion (and its socialist underpinnings), which this thesis argues, is utilized to perform the role of an alternative. This notion is the very thing that implies the possibility of an alternative. However, it still has remained unactualized in these games.

Interestingly, many of the studies (Humphreys, 2012; Bagnoli, 2019; Morgan, 2020), examine *RDR* games as American cultural artifacts. However, as this thesis argues, more suitable approach is provided, when these games are situated in relation to the traditions of European critique of capitalism. This thesis presented how radical Italian filmmakers made use of a genre cinema to advance their political aspirations. All the plot variants common to the Spaghetti Western introduced by Fisher (2014) are present in *RDR* series. These games, according to Fisher (2014), worked as a denouncements of capitalist values. When examining these artifacts from a position that situates *RDR* and *GTA* games to form a canon, it can be argued that they work as a radical critique of contemporary Western societies. They adopt features of a (American) society, and with the help of overt satire, make some inherent injustices and social issues present in contemporary Western societies visible. Thus, this thesis argues that the *RDR* series is more a result of cultural borrowing and renegotiation. It arguably shares common features with Hollywood Western's (both literature and film), however it merely borrows its tropes, renegotiates their meaning, and thus utilizes them to work as a critique of the very things it depicts in its game worlds.

In an interview by GQ Magazine (White, 2018) Dan Houser, the co-founder of Rockstar Games, states that some things in the world today are "beyond satire". By this he refers to the difficulty of satirizing Trump's America or other contemporary Western societies (White, 2018). Maybe this can

be considered to imply that there is a need for an alternative. However, as this thesis argues, Rockstar's games express potential for a video game canon that is both, mainstream and radically progressive.

While Westerside and Holopainen (2019) and Donald and Reid (2020) focus on the game world as a place, this study places its focus on the main story in the analysis. While this thesis shares some of the findings with Westerside and Holopainen (2019), Donald and Reid (2020) ignore completely *RDR2*'s narrative elements and thus, comparisons to this study are hard to make.

However, what is noteworthy in the context of this thesis, is that as Westerside and Holopainen (2019) note, in *RDR2* the game world is not just a space to roam in, but more a world to exist in. This is highlighted by, for example, the comparison between the behaviors of inhabitants of *RDR* and *GTA* game worlds. While in the cities of *GTA* people seem to just run around aimlessly, existing just to be exploited by a player; in *RDR* the world appears more lifelike, in a sense, that people seem to have a reason for their existence. They commit various work, chat around, and continue to perform those tasks regardless of the player. Thus, it can be considered, that while the game worlds of *GTA* imply that the world exists for the player, in *RDR* the world exists despite the player. This is in many ways due to the technological developments in video games, which enable more sophisticated expression, but it however interestingly reflects the idea that the contemporary Western societies are fundamentally individualistic; while there was a time where the reasons to exist were seen more communal. Or at least, it highlights the notion of the heightened potential of video games to camouflage the fact, that the player is the center of the game world. However, from Althusserian perspective, revolution is necessary, if we aim to achieve the ultimate holodeck experience

envisioned by Murray (2017). Because only if the State power is captured from a game's designers, can a player's curiosity be the driving force of the narrative progress.

All the other studies presented differ from this thesis in that they place their focus on solely either one of the games. This thesis argues that as they narratively form a whole, they are crucial to study as an entity. Especially when considering the ideological analysis, to fully grasp the ideological underpinnings of the fictional world they render, the consideration of the complete story affects to the results rather dramatically.

Chapter four presented and critically considered the applicability of formal and critical analysis to video games. It offered description of the method and analyzed the possible weaknesses of it. This thesis found that the method is suitable to inspect ideological underpinnings of a video game. As argued in the chapter, one must explicitly acknowledge that a researcher cannot escape his background while conducting a research based on this type of an analysis. However, the similar notions made in other studies, support the arguments provided in this thesis. One important aspect of video game literacy is the ability to acknowledge one's on position, and how it might reflect to the findings of the study. Thus, I want to explicitly acknowledge my privileged position as a white, north European man, and as such, a product of a Scandinavian welfare state. My socio-economic position situates me as a member of the proletariat. I am also a gamer, who chooses often, for his method of relaxation, to spend his spare time by delving into the worlds rendered by different RPGs and open world adventure video games. Video games have been a part of my life over three decades. It could be argued that all these might significantly affect on the analysis of the game world, thus rendering the arguments made in this thesis as mere opinions, in the Bownian sense reflecting my own dreams and desires. However, I contend that the arguments made in this thesis

are based upon well-informed, critical perspective; and are also solidly grounded in the previous research.

The fifth chapter presented the formal and critical analysis conducted on Rockstar Games' *RDR* games. This chapter offered a reading of the games from Althusserian perspective and found that the approach to video games as ideological apparatuses may yield interesting results. Not only are *RDR* games positioned as critical and commercial successes, but also found to be advocating progressive, even radical values.

To conclude, the aim of this thesis was to highlight the importance of the study of the ideological underpinnings of video games. The results provided in this thesis advocate this understanding and offer a reasoning for the necessity of the further research relating to the topic.

7 CONCLUSIONS

The key argument of this thesis is the importance of ideological analysis of mainstream video games. As this thesis demonstrates, *RDR* games emerge as video games that are at the same time both, mainstream and radically progressive in content. In this thesis, an approach from the Althusserian perspective formulates an understanding of how video games function as ideological apparatuses, on two levels. First, they are a part of cultural ideological state apparatuses (Althusser, 2012). Thus, they are a part of apparatuses where “dominant shared codes find their form, are communicated, are interrupted, or are resisted and reformulated” (Murray, 2018; 5). Second, video games themselves render in front of us completely new worlds with their own ideological apparatuses (Quijano-Cruz, 2008). Thus, as a result of this study, a reader understands the nature of a video game as an ideological apparatus and can recognize the ideological and political underpinnings of a virtual reality rendered for them in a video game.

The thesis basis its arguments on the recent literature relevant to the topic. After conceptualizing all video games as political and ideological apparatuses, thesis presented considerations of how to situate video games from historical, cultural, social and economic perspectives. The findings in this thesis state, that

- 1) from historical perspective, this study recognizes the requirements for developing these games, and acknowledges the (human) cost to produce them. Not only are these games amazing feats from technological perspective, they also highlight the developments in the sophistication of medium’s expressive potential.

2) from cultural perspective *RDR* games are relevant to study, because these video games are widely appreciated by critics and players, thus they are not only commercial successes, but also exemplary video games. They are a part of mainstream (video game) culture, and thus, participate in the discussion where “dominant shared codes find their form, are communicated, are interrupted, or are resisted and reformulated”. (Murray, 2018; 5.)

3) from social perspective, they provide us new worlds to explore and conquer, and a platform to test different social constructions in action. As they participate in the construction and reflection of our dreams and desires (Bown, 2018), it becomes a necessity to study the social realities they render, to understand our own culture, and video games, better.

4) from economic perspective, these video games are products of the game industry. As stated, video games are the fastest growing entertainment sector (capitalgroup.com, 2019). Thus, they garner a lot of financial attention and are relevant to study. Even if the games these companies provide might contain progressive values, the companies themselves often do not utilize these values in action.

By examining a game’s rules and the field of possibilities in combination with formal and critical analysis, ideological underpinnings of a game world can be observed. Žižek (2018) has stated that to be a philosopher today, one should study video games. This is because the worlds in video games are not perfectly programmed. A game world offers a player incomplete universe, where some

things are rendered possible, while others are not (Mitchell, 2017; Murray, 2018; Zizek, 2018). Thus, what is included and what is left out, always correspond to a certain worldview (Flanagan & Nissenbaum, 2014; Murray, 2018). In *RDR* games, a player is offered a freedom to experience the life in the Wild West as one of the last outlaws. But the game's Wild West is filled with unnatural limits. The clearest example of this is that, while you can season meat with herbs, you cannot swim underwater.

According to Zizek, "we live in 'a society of the spectacle', in which the media structure our perception of reality in advance and render reality indistinguishable from the 'aestheticized' image of it" (2012; 1). What video games do then, is that they offer as us an aestheticized image of reality, which can be reflected to reality as it is. By rendering different types of worlds, video games can be utilized to show us our potential futures, and as a participatory medium they let us experience the consequences of our actions in these imaginary realities.

7.1 FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

As already proposed, the Rockstar Games' open world games, namely *GTA* and *RDR* series, forms a fictional timeline of the American history. As stated, considered as a whole, Rockstar's open world games (*GTA+RDR*) build a view of history of the America developing from the wild to the hyper capitalist theme park. As *RDR* series focuses on laying building blocks and foundations of future society to come, *GTA* series simulates this society in effect. Thus, it would be interesting to study this thought further.

Also, the study of political and ideological underpinnings of other video game titles could provide interesting insights to the (video game) culture. Especially the study of ideological underpinnings in

Finnish video games could yield interesting results, as their signifying practices and the understanding of the world arise from rather similar background to the author of this thesis. The consideration of how different political ideologies are represented in video games could offer an interesting approach to study video games as well.

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